University of Alberta

@30

by

Pamela Kathleen Chamberlain ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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P Chamberlain

Pamela Kathleen Chamberlain
General Delivery
Tulliby Lake, Alberta
T0A 3K0

November 22, 2002
Date

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *@30* submitted by Pamela Kathleen Chamberlain in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Professor Kristjana Gunnars

M. Elizabeth Sargent

Professor M. Elizabeth Sargent

Professor E. L. Bishop

Malena

Professor Anne Malena

Oct. 28/02

Date

for
Sara, Shannon, and Susan
for pulling me through

and

for
Aliya
for bringing me joy

Abstract

Set in rural and urban Alberta in a society dominated by traditional and pop culture myths about love, marriage, beauty, aging, gender roles, and motherhood, *@30* is a novella that explores thirty-year-old Vanessa Stanley's struggle to achieve self-acceptance after a painful divorce, to cope with the demise of an important friendship, and to develop an identity as a writer.

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November

"My birthday is canceled this year," I say. "Due to lack of interest."

"Don't be silly, Vanessa," Megan says. "Everyone wants to celebrate your birthday."

"Everyone except me!"

"Well, you can't just cancel your birthday," she insists. "Thirty is a big one." As if I need to be reminded.

~

Bridget Jones's Diary has come out on video, so on November 1st—my birthday—Megan throws me a Bridget party. We've all read the book and seen the movie in the theatre at least once. Our old college friends, Roxy and Lindsay, have come down to Camrose from Edmonton, and Claire has come up from Calgary. Her parents are babysitting her daughter tonight. There's lots of wine. No boys.

We work our way through three bottles of wine as we watch the movie. I hog a bottle of blush, and before long we're out of wine and into the liquor cupboard, which is well stocked with dusty bottles that have been left behind after various parties. Claire and Roxy go for the port. I decide that Grand Marnier is more girly, so I pour a wineglass full for myself and one for Megan. Megan sips hers slowly. I chug mine to avoid the taste. By the time Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy are fist-fighting over Bridget, I am really drunk. Roxy yells at Bridget through the TV screen: "Pick Mark, you idiot! Pick Mark!"

"I tell you," Claire says, leaning back and taking a swig of port. "I'd take Colin Firth home any night of the week. Hugh Grant is such a pretty boy."

"I love Hugh Grant!" I slur. "I love pretty boys."

Claire turns to point at me, wineglass in hand. "That," she declares, "sums up of all your problems."

I laugh so hard that I roll off the couch and land face-down on the floor. My wineglass stem snaps in two, and the Grand Marnier spills across the hardwood. By the time I manage to pull myself up, there are tears streaming down my face. It's definitely time to call it a night.

My stomach starts to heave, and I stumble to the bathroom. Megan finds me retching into the toilet, sobbing. "I swear I am going to quit drinking so much," I say.

She washes my face and tells me, "You'll be fine. You just need to get some sleep." She pulls me to my feet. "I need to get going anyway, because I'm heading up to Edmonton to spend the weekend with Matt."

"What time is it?" I mumble.

She laughs. "It's only ten o'clock."

"You can't leave my birthday party!" I cry. "It's my very own thirtieth birthday party! Besides, it's in your house!"

"I think you're done for the night." She puts her arm around me to help me stagger through the living room, and she steers me into my bedroom. I fall onto the bed. "Good night," she says, as she begins to pull the door shut.

"Wait!" I say. She pauses. I look up at her and try to focus my eyes so I can tell her something really important. "You know what really gets me about Bridget?" I ask.

"What?"

"No one's ever loved me just as I am." Then everything goes black.

~

My headache finally begins to subside at about eight o'clock the next evening. Megan is at Matt's, so the house is quiet. I am still in my pyjamas. My stomach is queasy, and I'm shivering from the chill in the house. I mix myself a mug of Baileys and hot chocolate, wrap myself in a blanket, and park myself in front of the TV on my bouncy IKEA chair. There's not much on, so I stop at Much Music when I see a spotlight on Enrique Iglesias. Megan's cat, Peka, jumps up on my lap. She circles around, looking for a comfy spot. I take a sip of my hot chocolate. Enrique Iglesias has got to be one of the most beautiful men on earth. Those eyes. Big and round. As brown as…Baileys. No, browner. Like Kahlua. Peka rolls onto her back, lying on my left forearm. Her head rests in the crook of my elbow, and her eyes are half shut. I rock in the chair a little, surprised that she doesn't jump up and run away. She purrs and her eyelids get heavier. She is so trusting and vulnerable. I sip my drink. In video after video, Enrique seems to be singing right to me, his haunted eyes staring at me. My arm starts to go numb. Last time we weighed the cat on the bathroom scale, she was ten pounds, the same weight Amy was when Claire gave birth to her two weeks overdue. I can't bring myself to move Peka, though. She's fast asleep and her paws are curled up in front of her face. The Baileys warms me up from the inside. I gaze at Enrique, past Enrique, and I become aware of an aching in my chest and an aching in my abdomen, an aching building in pressure until I feel it might suffocate me.

~

I guess one boy loved me just as I was: Terrence Campbell. I was eleven and in Grade 7. He was thirteen and the only Grade 8 student in our small, rural school. I knew he liked me when he ran at me full-throttle and knocked me into the high jump mat. Nancy Bensmiller saw this, and it made her mad as a weasel. I started volunteering to dictate Terrence's spelling tests to him out in the hallway during class. Since Mr. Nielsen was always busy with three grades in one room, he gave jobs such as tutoring younger students or marking quizzes or dictating tests to good students whom he trusted. Terrence was a terrible speller. I didn't dare tell him the correct spellings, even though I could have easily done so in the privacy outside the closed classroom door. But I knew cheating was a sin, so instead I watched as he spelled out the words, and if they were wrong, I would shake my head ever-so-slightly and pause before reading the next word to give him time to erase his answer and try again.

Before long, Terrence and I were "boyfriend and girlfriend," and we spent every recess and lunch hour out near home plate on the baseball field in the northwest corner of the schoolyard, which was as far away from the school as we could get without breaking any rules. We'd lie on the grass with my best friend, Kerri Lynn, talking and listening to music. We talked about getting out of Tulliby Lake when Terrence was old enough to drive. The three of us already felt stifled in this isolated agricultural community. He traced his finger along my bra straps through the back of my T-shirt, causing shivers to rush through me. "I'll pick you both up," he said, though I thought he mentioned Kerri Lynn only out of politeness. "We'll go south on Highway 17 to Lloydminster first." He screeched around the bra-strap corners of my back with his fingers. "Then west on Highway 16, all the way to Edmonton. We'll never come back." He wanted to escape his dad, who hit him with a belt. I wanted to escape my parents, for no good reason at all.

Usually it was quiet in the schoolyard. The little kids played on the other side of the school, so the only interruption was the occasional cow grazing across the fence. Bees and butterflies fluttered in the air, and by June bright yellow buffalo beans and brown-eyed Susies were blooming. Kerri Lynn had received a ghetto blaster for her birthday, and she had figured out how to dub her older sister's LPs onto cassettes by placing the ghetto blaster in front of the record player while it played. We would lie in the sun and listen to Juice Newton or the Kendalls, belting out the lyrics in three-part harmony:

Heaven's just a sin away, whoa, just a sin away
Can't wait another day, I think I'm giving in

Oh way down deep inside, I know that it's so wrong
Your eyes keep tempting me, and I never was that strong
Devil's got me now, whoa, gone and got me now
Can't fight him anyhow, I think he's gonna win

Heaven's just a sin away, whoa, just a sin away
Heaven help me when I say, I think I'm giving in

One day when we were dismissed from school, my parents were waiting outside. They told me not to go on the bus, but to wait for them. They had a meeting with Mr. Nielsen. When we got home, we sat down for a Talk. Mom said, "Mr. Nielsen is worried about you. He thinks you're boy-crazy." I didn't answer. Terrence had nothing to do with being "boy-crazy." Mr. Nielsen was stupid for thinking so, and my parents were stupid for believing him.

"We want you to stay away from Terrence," Dad said, with finality.

I obeyed, at least when the teachers were around. Besides, it was pretty tough to stay away from Terrence since he was the only boy in the whole Big Room and our desks were right next to each other, although I was no longer allowed to dictate his spelling tests.

One day, Kerri Lynn asked me what I'd do if Terrence ever tried to kiss me. I thought about it for a minute. I'd been reading lots of *Sweet Dreams* romances, so I knew that a kiss should be coming soon. To tell the truth, I hoped he *would* kiss me. After all, I was already eleven. But Kerri Lynn and I had spent a great deal of time planning what we'd do if a boy ever "tried anything" with us. So I gave her the only answer I could. "I'd slap him across the face," I said.

"I knew it!" she shouted triumphantly. "That's what I told him you'd do, but he said to ask you anyway." My heart just sank as she ran off to report back to Terrence.

The school year came to an end. I had turned twelve, and he had turned fourteen. On the last day of school, the teachers loaded us all into a bus and took us to Whitney Lake for swimming and a wiener roast. Of course, there was no way any of us Grade 7 girls would be caught dead in a bathing suit, so Mr. Nielsen said it was okay if a bunch of us went for a walk. Terrence came with us. We walked through the poplars to a small spot of sandy beach, and everyone sat down for a smoke. I sat between Terrence and Kerri Lynn. They lit up their cigarettes. So did Nancy, Jeannette, and Rhonda.

"Aren't you going to have one, Vanessa?" Nancy asked me innocently.

"No, thanks," I said. I had never tried smoking, and I wasn't sure if I was more afraid of actually smoking or of what my parents would do to me if they ever found out.

"Here, have some of mine," Nancy said, leaning forward. She held her smouldering cigarette under my nose. I leaned away, but she kept pushing it towards me.

"I don't want any," I said, beginning to feel frightened.

"What's wrong, little baby?" she said, laughing. "Your mommy and daddy aren't here. Are you chicken?"

Nancy turned to Terrence, who was taking a drag off his own cigarette, for approval. I looked to Kerri Lynn for support, but she was looking at Terrence, too. I realized she would go whichever way he did. All the girls would. I turned to him, afraid for the first time that I might not be able to trust him. He winked at me, and then he lightly slapped Nancy's wrist away. "She said she doesn't want any," he told her. "Grow up, for chrissakes!"

"Yeah, Nancy," Kerri Lynn echoed hotly. "Grow up!"

Terrence crushed his cigarette in the sand. "Come on, Vanessa," he said, pulling me up gently. "Let's go back." The girls scrambled up. "Leave us alone for a bit," he ordered. As we walked away, I looked over my shoulder at Nancy, who was red-faced and glowering, and for the first time I felt that smug satisfaction that comes with victory over another woman in fighting for a man.

We stopped halfway back on the trail to the main beach. My stomach churned painfully as I realized I had never been all alone with Terrence like this. There was no one else around. It was both thrilling and terrifying. Terrence took a deep breath. "I have something for you," he said. Out of his jean jacket pocket he pulled a little white box with a gold Fishers stamp on it. Inside was a delicate gold chain with my yellow birthstone in a heart-shaped pendant.

I could hardly breathe. "It's beautiful!" He clasped it around my neck.

"I'm going to school in Marwayne in the fall," he said. "But I'll write to you in the summer." Our parents' farms were only ten miles apart, but it might as well have been a million.

"No, don't write!" I said. "My parents would kill me if I got a letter from you."

"We could phone," he suggested. "You could phone me when your parents were outside."

"It's a party line," I reminded him.

He looked disappointed. Then he grabbed my hands. "I'm gonna buy that truck," he promised. "As soon as I turn sixteen." I knew he would. I knew that gold necklace was as good as an engagement ring. He leaned forward, and I closed my eyes in preparation for a kiss (because the girls in *Sweet Dreams* always closed their eyes). Just then, Kerri Lynn and the others came crashing through the bushes. Terrence straightened and dropped my hands. I was trembling. Nancy marched right past us, but the other girls held back, and we all walked together.

I hid the necklace in my room at home, changing the hiding place so my mom wouldn't find it. Eventually, I hid it so well I lost it. One day we happened to be in Fishers in Lloydminster, and I made some excuse to get away from Mom and go to the jewelry counter. I found it in the glass case. It was exactly the same as the pendant Terrence had given me. Thirteen dollars. I was determined to save my five-dollars-a-month allowance until I could replace that necklace. That way, Terrence would never know I'd lost it. But we went on holidays to BC that summer, and I spent my allowance money on ice cream and souvenirs for Grandma. I never did manage to save enough for the necklace.

I spent the rest of the summer studying to be a scientist by using my father's books on tree, grass, weed, and wildflower identification to catalog the plants growing in our farmyard. Mom bought me a second-hand Canadian atlas from the Salvation Army store in Lloydminster, and I pored through it, copying down information about Alberta. I wrote a description of Tulliby Lake in my diary, thinking it would be the first entry in an encyclopedia of Canadian geography and ecology that I'd write when I was a famous scientist:

Place: Tulliby Lake, Alberta, Canada, North America, Northern Hemisphere, The World, The Milky Way, The Universe

Absolute Location: 53° 40′ N 110° 08′ W
Relative Location: Middle of nowhere
Elevation: 574 metres
Region: Parkland/Boreal Forest
Average Temp.: December -17°C; July +17°C
Annual Prec.: 425 mm
Population: 30 urban; 250 rural
Area: 145 km^2
Pop. Density: 2/km^2

That fall, Terrence went to high school in Marwayne, and I became one of the Big Girls in the Tulliby Lake School. I was obsessed with watching videos three times a week on *Coming Attractions*. Kerri Lynn and I listened to Duran Duran and Culture Club on CKSA radio, and we practiced break dance moves in her living room. My class started a school newspaper, which we copied in purple ink on a hand-cranked duplicating machine. I wrote passionate articles about the discovery of a new disease called AIDS that afflicted Africans and homosexuals and about the benefit concerts my favourite pop singers were putting on to raise money for the famine in Ethiopia.

One Friday morning, Terrence's little sister told me that he had run away from home the night before. He had stolen money from their mom's wallet. Their dad had even called the RCMP, but they couldn't find Terrence.

I spent the weekend in my bedroom, waiting for him to come and tap on the window. I packed a little bag for a quick escape: a few clothes, an old toothbrush, and copies of *The Outsiders* and *Homecoming* for reference. I stared out that window so hard I could actually see Terrence appearing over the edge of the roof, clinging to the trunk of the maple, to reach my second-storey window. I could see how he'd smile when he saw me waiting there.

But I never saw Terrence again. He never did come to get me. I probably wouldn't have been ready anyway.

~

After weeks of me begging her to go out, Megan humours me, and we go to Cadillacs on a Saturday night. Sure enough, the first person I see is Evan. Ah, the joys of living in a small town with only one night club. Megan and I are desperate to get out of Camrose, and this is exactly why. Here is what I wrote in my diary about Camrose when I moved here to attend college twelve (can it really be twelve?!) years ago:

Place: Camrose, Alberta

Absolute Location: 53° 02′ N 112° 49′ W
Relative Location: 257 km SW of Tulliby Lake
Elevation: 739 metres
Region: Parkland
Average Temp.: December –13°C; July +17°C
Annual Prec.: 478 mm
Population: 14, 854
Area: 25 km^2
Pop. Density: 574/km^2

I figure there are three possible ways to handle this. One, leave the bar—which I don't want to do, because I am sick of having my life revolve around him. Two, stay and ignore him—which I don't want to do, because I don't want to be ducking around corners like a fool to avoid him. Three, go say "hi," get it over with, and then do my own thing and enjoy hanging out with Megan. I opt for number three. He's alone, leaning against the railing of the dance floor, absently watching the dancers. I smooth my hair. "Hey," I yell, as casually as possible over the blaring music.

He looks surprised. I suppose this is the last place he expects to see me. "Hey, Vanessa. How's it going?"

"All right."

"You here alone?"

"No, with Megan."

"Oh," he says without interest. I realize he was wondering if I was with a guy. I wish for a moment that I had made up a male companion. I am about to say goodbye when Brandi comes up behind him, grabs him by the arm, and spins him violently around. It happens so fast that I only see a blur. She pulls him away, and I try to get a good look at her in the dark, but I can't. I can't hear what she's saying over the din, but I can tell that she's yelling. I look like an idiot standing there alone, so I wander back to Megan, and we look for a table.

"Did you get a good look at her?" she asks.

"Nah," I said. "Too dark."

"I bet her hair is bleached."

Our waitress is Crystal, a petite brunette who used to work at Boston Pizza and the Feedmill. She's always friendly and remembers what we drink. When Megan and I are halfway through our bottles of Mike's Hard Lemonade, Crystal comes back to the table.

"We're good," I say.

"Um," she hesitates. "Look I don't even want to pass this on because I feel so stupid, but I figure I should just in case she's serious."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," she says, shaking her head. "This is so dumb. But Brandi says if you so much as look at Evan again, she's going to beat the shit out of you."

I stare at Crystal, then at Megan, incredulous. I laugh. "What!"

"I know, it's totally immature. But you know, a couple of weeks ago we had to get the cops in here to pull her off some chick she thought was hitting on Evan."

"You're kidding."

Crystal shrugs. "They dragged her out to the parking lot and told the bouncers not to let her back in. But then after the cops left, she smashed in the chick's windshield with a rock. Or, so they say. There was no eyewitnesses or nothing, and she was long gone, so the cops couldn't charge her with a thing."

"Wow!" I say. I try to imagine how Evan could love someone like that.

"Take it for what it's worth. Just be careful." She moves on to do her rounds.

"This is unbelievable," Megan says. "Who *does* things like that?"

"I feel like I'm Grade 7. Or on *Jerry Springer*."

Megan says, "You know, I find it hard to believe she'd actually do it, but do you really want to take the chance?"

"No," I say. "Let's get out of here. It's not like we'll have any fun now, anyway."

We leave our drinks and make our way to the door. Through the smoke-filled dimness, I see Evan and Brandi. His back is to me. Her hand is on his upper arm. She throws me a victorious smirk over his shoulder. I look away and follow Megan out the door.

This town is way too small.

~

I drive down to Calgary for the weekend and baby-sit for Claire on Saturday afternoon so she can get a haircut. Her daughter, Amy, and I go to the playground. We share the slide with a talkative little girl who, I soon find out, is named Layla, is in Grade 3, and speaks Arabic at home. Layla's father is throwing a party tonight because her mom finally, after having four girls, has given birth to a boy.

Amy wanders off to dig in the sand, but Layla sticks with me and asks me questions about Amy's age (three), what languages she speaks (just English), and what school she goes to (none yet). Then she turns her attention to me.

"You're not her mom, are you?" she asks.

"No," I say, and I'm surprised and disappointed that it's so obvious.

"Do you have kids of your own?" she asks. No, I answer.

"Are you married?" No.

"Do you even have a boyfriend?" No.

Exasperated, she asks, "How old are you, anyway?"

I pause and, for a moment, I crazily consider lying to this little girl by telling her I'm eighteen. She wouldn't know the difference anyway. I realize how ridiculous that would be, so I say, "I'm thirty." It's the first time I've said it aloud.

Her eyes widen. "Whoa," she says, letting out a big breath. "You're supposed to be married by now."

I force a smile. "Well, maybe someday," I say in a high-pitched voice that I hope sounds cheerful.

Layla leans off the edge of the jungle gym and peers intently into my face. "I know," she says decisively. "Maybe older boys don't like girls who wear glasses."

I call, "Come on, Amy! Time to go!" Although it's not.

Layla continues. "Or maybe they don't like big white teeth like yours." A pause. She's deep in thought. "My mom smokes all the time, so she gots gross stinky teeth. But at least she gots a husband."

I wish I did, too. More than anything.

~

December

I've been divorced for eighteen months. Everyone tells me it's time to "get back in the game." Time is ticking. I have to admit the thought is enticing. After all, I haven't been on a first date since I met Evan ten years ago. I imagine old-fashioned romance: flowers, a candle-lit meal, a peck on the cheek goodnight. For so long it was impossible to imagine myself with anyone except Evan, but after being alone so long, I begin to consider the possibility of meeting someone new.

~

Megan throws a Christmas party at our house. It's her house, actually, but I moved in temporarily when Evan and I sold our house to finalize the divorce settlement, and now I've been here almost a year. By ten o'clock, all of her co-workers have left, so we can stop trying to "be good" for appearances. It looks like it'll just be a few of us for the long haul. Roxy, Lindsay, Megan, and I have a few drinks while their boyfriends talk computers in the kitchen. Megan decides it's time to try out the frozen raspberry daiquiri mix she bought at Costco, so we make our way to the kitchen.

"Whoo-hoo!" Roxy hoots to the guys in her best Homer Simpson voice. "Time for some naked Twister!"

I laugh, and then I see that Matt isn't smiling. "She's just kidding," I tell him.

"Oh," he says.

Then I can't resist. "We'll save that for a little later." I wink at him.

He looks at his watch. "I think it's time I head home," he says to Megan, frowning. "Will you come with me?"

"I can't leave my own party, silly," she says. "Why don't you stay?"

"I think I'll head home," he repeats.

Megan walks him to the door and kisses him goodnight. "Stay for naked Twister!" Roxy calls after him. We all burst out laughing. Megan comes back and gives us a half-hearted glare. "You guys should be nice to him."

"Well, he should stay," Lindsay says. "He should try to get to know us a little."

I feel bad for Matt. After all, we've all known each other for twelve years, since we all moved into 3rd West in the freshman residence at Augustana. Matt's known Megan only six months. We should try harder, I think. But he should try harder, too.

Lindsay's boyfriend, David, says, "I think we should leave you girls to drink those daiquiris." He nods to Roxy's boyfriend, Jeffrey. "Let's walk down to Claddagh's for a pint of Guinness and a game of darts." Jeffrey agrees, so it's just us four girls left.

Megan pours a mickey of white rum into the daiquiri mix, and we all agree it tastes just as good as the ones at Julio's Barrio. We rehash college stories. "Remember when we dressed you up for that date with Sean McNary," Roxy screeches, and we all laugh until we cry. I can't believe it's been twelve years. So much has happened. And so little has changed.

None of us can hold our liquor like we used to. We giggle like teenagers. Roxy has a brilliant idea. "Let's go dancing!" she says. "Let's go to Rumours, or whatever it's called now and show those college punks how it's done."

"You're so out-of-date," I say. "Everyone goes to Cadillacs nowadays."

"Well, whatever! But let's go!"

We put on lipstick and fumble for our coats. We are just about to walk out the door when the phone rings. Megan checks the call display. "Oops," she giggles. "Big Brother is checking up on me." She picks up the receiver. "Hello, handsome," she croons in a flirty, alcohol-tinted voice.

"Well, hurry it up!" Lindsay calls. "We've got some dancing to do."

Megan frowns and waves *shush* to Lindsay. She walks to her bedroom and closes the door. We settle on the couch, coats on, and have a few more sips of the raspberry daiquiris.

"*Some*-one's in *trou*-ble," I sing-song.

The bedroom door opens and Megan's head pops through. She smiles weakly and looks totally sober. "You guys will have to go ahead without me," she says. "It looks like we're going to be having a Talk."

"Ohhhh," Lindsay whines. "It won't be any fun without you."

Megan shakes her head. "Just go."

So we do. We button our coats and walk down the street. Cadillacs is only two blocks away. We are quiet and sober. Finally Roxy breaks the silence. "So how is that going to work, anyway, with him not drinking and all?"

"I don't know," I say.

"What's with this Lutheran thing, anyway? Are they all prohibitionists?"

"No. I mean, Megan and I are Lutheran, too, but I guess he's just of a stricter variety," I say. "And he wants to be a pastor."

"All I know is that he can't wait to get us out of her life," Lindsay says, and her voice cracks.

"Yeah," Roxy says. "We're such bad influences, you know."

I am surprised to hear them say this. I thought I was the only one who thought it. I'd told myself that I was just jealous of all the time Megan was spending with Matt, that I wasn't giving him a fair chance. If it weren't so sad, I would laugh at the thought of Lindsay, Roxy, and me being bad influences. Lindsay, who majored in social work, develops programs for mentally handicapped people through an Edmonton community association. Roxanne, an art history major, works at a gallery on Jasper Avenue. I make modest use of my English degree by writing articles for the food, agriculture, and community pages of the *Camrose Gazette*. We're not quite promising recruits for the Hells Angels. We have drinks once or twice a month. We get drunk maybe twice a year. We all like to dance, Megan included, but we're too old for the clubs, except on a lark like tonight. A big outing nowadays is a book launch or a Celtic concert.

The bar isn't the same without Megan. I keep thinking about the conversation they're having on the phone and about how she's apologizing to him for having a party, for drinking, for thinking of going to the bar, maybe even for having friends like us. I think about how I feel like I'm losing her. She's my best friend.

I make a toast with Roxy and Lindsay, for old time's sake. We try to dance to Britney Spears and *NSYNC, but as we look around the dance floor, we realize that things have changed. It's been at least five years since we could fit into a place like this without looking old.

An hour later we're back at Megan's place. Lindsay and Roxy's boyfriends are back, so the girls say goodnight and tiptoe downstairs to the spare rooms. I clear away a few dishes, pick up some bottles, and put the daiquiri mix back in the freezer. I notice Megan's bedroom light on. I push her door open a little. She is saying, "But I hardly really drank anything, anyway…." I pull the door shut quietly.

I go to bed. I have bad dreams. Maybe it's the rum.

~

The next morning, Megan is up before me. The kitchen has been cleaned, and she's frying pancakes for brunch. She stomps on the floor to wake up the four in the basement. "Come on, you guys!" she yells down the stairs. "Breakfast time!"

I perch on a stool by the door and watch her flip pancakes. "So, how'd it go last night?" she asks cheerily.

"Ah, it was all right, I guess."

"Any cute college boys?"

"Hah!" I laugh. Pause. "How'd it go with you?"

She laughs lightly. "Oh, Matt and I talked for at least two hours."

"About the party," I say.

"Yeah," she says. "He just doesn't get it. Why I drink, you know."

"Well, it's hardly like you're an alcoholic," I say. "It's not a big deal. He shouldn't judge you for it."

Her smile fades, and she says defensively, "He doesn't judge me for it. We just talk about it because he wants to understand."

"You talked for two hours because he wants to understand why you drink?" I ask skeptically. "If he wanted to understand, he'd go get hammered. He just wants you to stop."

"It's not like that," she says, her voice high and strained. "Matt is the most amazing, good, tolerant person I have ever met. I could only hope to be as good a person as he is."

"Okay," I say. "I'm sorry."

"It's about compromise," she says. "You'll understand, when you have a boyfriend again someday."

Lindsay and Roxy come thundering up the stairs, boyfriends in tow. "Where's the Tylenol?" Roxy demands. "I feel like my head is gonna explode!" They fill up the room with their chatter.

I look across the kitchen at Megan, and the space between us seems unbridgeable.

~

The next weekend, I call my parents-in-law (ex-parents-in-law, I guess) just before lunch on Sunday. "I was up in Edmonton in Chinatown yesterday, and I bought some really nice *yucca* for you," I tell Evan's mom.

"Oh, that's a nice surprise," she says. "We haven't had fresh *yucca* for ages." Evan's parents picked up a taste for it while on a posting in Mexico twenty years ago. Their smooth Spanish-accented pronunciation—*ju′kʌ*, sort of rhyming with "toque"—is something I've never been able to manage.

"Is it all right if I stop by in a few minutes to drop it off? I'm just on my way out."

She hesitates.

"Is it a bad time?" I ask.

"Oh, no," she says. "Of course not. You're welcome here any time."

"Great. I'll see you in a few minutes." I hang up. If I'm lucky I'll get there in time for lunch.

I grab the *yucca* from a bag on the counter, and then toss it on the car seat beside me. She'll be thrilled. It's an excellent specimen. Dark-skinned, about a foot long, and as hard as a rock. It's hard to find fresh *yucca* in Alberta grocery stores.

When I get to the house, I pull into the driveway in the backyard and come up the back steps. As usual, I don't knock, but let myself in. I call out "Hello!" and head for the kitchen, wondering if they've already started eating.

I stop short. They've started eating, all right. My mother-in-law and my father-in-law are sitting at the kitchen table having lunch with Evan *and* Brandi. She's sitting in my chair! "Oh," I say, struggling to regain composure. "Hi."

Evan's father and mother stare at their plates, red-faced. Brandi glares at Evan. "Hey, Vanessa," Evan says to me, with a surprised and sympathetic smile. "What's up?" Obviously his mom couldn't cope with telling anyone that I was coming any more than she could cope with telling me not to come over.

"Um. I have *yucca*!" I announce, waving the big brown root vegetable in the air helplessly, wincing as I realize I've pronounced it *jʌ'kʌ*, like "yuck." Everything in my body tells me to run, to get out of there as fast as I can, but I am determined to be mature and dignified. I wonder if he'll introduce us. Brandi and me. If he'll actually do a stupid formal introduction.

His mom sees an opening. "Oh, that's a lovely *yucca*," she croons. "I can't wait to try it. Thank you so much. What do I owe you?"

None of them have moved. I feel dizzy, standing in the middle of the kitchen. I lean back and rest my hand against the counter. I want to look right at Brandi, to see whether she's prettier than me, thinner than me, has bigger boobs than me. But I don't dare. I don't trust myself to keep it together if I do. So I look only at Evan, who, strangely, seems to be my lifeboat here. He smiles.

"You don't owe me anything," I say, forcing a smile. "My treat."

I look down and see that the *yucca* is still in my hand. I put it on the counter.

"So what are you up to these days?" Evan asks.

What am I up to these days? Recovering from a nervous breakdown, maybe? "Well, I've been accepted by the English department at the U of A," I say out loud. They're going to let me take one graduate-level class after Christmas. On Margaret Laurence. She's, um, a Canadian writer. I'm going to drive up on Tuesday evenings."

"Good for you," he says. "You always were smarter than me."

"That's not true," I say, and then there is an awkward silence.

"Well," says Evan, shrugging. "It was good to see you."

I let myself be dismissed. “Uh. You too,” I say breezily. “Enjoy the—” I break off awkwardly. The pronunciations are all muddled in my head. I escape through the back door, walking as slowly and naturally as I can force myself to.

Like I said before, *way* too small for the three of us.

~

I call Claire as soon as I get home. I tell her every detail. “Oh, my God,” she says, laughing. “That is so horrible. But so funny. Did you really say, *I have yucca*?”

“I really did.”

She laughs and then struggles to catch her breath. “Are you okay? Really?”

“Besides being completely mortified, I guess so.”

“Hey, I think you handled it as well as you could have. You’re definitely doing much better.”

“I guess so.”

“Someday, you’re going to look back on this and laugh. Trust me.”

~

I met Evan in a hot tub in Calgary. I’d gone down there for the weekend with my boyfriend, Sean. It was a big deal. My first time in Calgary. My first road trip with a boy. My first trip without my parents. My first hot tub party. I was nineteen.

Place:	Calgary, Alberta
Absolute Location:	51° 07′ N 114° 01′ W
Relative Location:	279 km SW of Camrose
Elevation:	1084 metres
Region:	Grassland
Average Temp.:	Winter -9°C; Summer +16°C
Annual Prec.:	413 mm
Population:	878, 866
Area:	702 km^2
Pop. Density:	1252/km^2

I’d left Sean upstairs in the library smoking what I soon realized was marijuana and flirting madly with a beautiful ex-girlfriend aptly named Desiree. Downstairs, people were clustered in intense little groups debating the benefits of acid versus mushrooms or trying to explain existentialist philosophy through drug-fogged brains. I didn't have the interest or the energy to join in. I was furious at Sean. The combination of pot smoke, blaring Depeche Mode, and the babble of pseudo-intellectual conversation was nauseating, so I made my way out the patio doors to the deck. All the girls seemed to be tall and stick-thin. They pranced around like they were in Ft. Lauderdale on Spring Break. I kept my towel wrapped around me like a mummy shroud.

In the dark, so still that I didn't notice him at first, Evan sat quietly in the hot tub, his head leaned back against the edge, eyes closed. I watched him for a moment. He was a friend of Sean's, and we'd met a few times before, but we'd never been alone together. He was gorgeous and confident, medium build with slicked-back brown hair. He wore flowing white shirts, and when he spoke to a girl, he had an Antonio Banderas gaze that made her feel as if he'd been waiting his whole life to fall in love with her.

I couldn't tell if he was asleep or not. I hesitated, not wanting to disturb him, but not wanting to go back in the house, either. I unwrapped my towel, adjusted my bathing suit, and slipped into the water. It felt scorchingly hot in contrast to the cool night air.

Evan opened his eyes a slit and looked at me without saying a word. I closed my eyes shyly and leaned back into a jet, letting the water swirl around me.

"They're all such posers in there, aren't they? Such losers," he said finally.

"Yeah, they are," I agreed.

"Even Sean?"

"Especially Sean," I said, my eyes still closed.

"I mean, I love the guy like a brother, but he's such a prick to women." I opened my eyes and was about to defend Sean, when I realized it was true. I had known it for a long time. Besides, I had just finished reading *The Beauty Myth,* and I had decided that I wanted nothing more to do with boyfriends I had to vomit for. Also, I had vowed to never shave my legs again, a decision I was regretting as I sat in the hot tub with Evan. Maybe he wouldn't notice. I made a mental note to shave them the next morning.

"You deserve better," Evan said, and when he said it, I believed it.

There was a long pause.

"I found out today that my mother has Alzheimer's," he said. "She's going insane. Before long, she won't even know who I am." Tears began sliding down his cheeks.

"Oh," I said stupidly. "I'm sorry." I thought how sensitive he must be to cry. Where I came from, boys did not cry.

"And my dad and I don't get along," he said. He sighed. "He used to beat me when I was little."

"Really?" I asked, both horrified and fascinated.

"Really," he said, staring at me heavy-lidded but unblinking with those tears slipping down his face.

I stared back. The music had slowed, and Chris Isaak's plaintive voice filtered out the kitchen window.

> *The world was on fire and no one could save me but you*
> *It's strange what desire will make foolish people do*
> *I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you*
> *I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you*

"You like this song?" Evan asked lazily.

"Yeah. I just bought the tape, actually."

"I love it. It's so sexy," he said, looking right at me.

> *What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way*
> *What a wicked thing to do, to let me dream of you*
> *No, I don't want to fall in love with you*
> *No, I don't want to fall in love with you*

Evan said, "It's crazy. I hardly know you, but I feel like you *get* me. It's like we're soul mates or something. Do you believe in soul mates?"

"Yeah," I said, my heart pounding. "I do."

"I don't have any family left," he choked. And he reached across the hot tub for me.

"*I* could be your family," I whispered, stretching my hand to his. And I felt dizzy from the heat, and the swirling water seemed to be swirling into the gravity of his eyes, and I got swept right along with it.

~

He completed me. He was all the things I wasn't: generous, outgoing, daring, outspoken, street-smart, impulsive. I was all the things he wanted to be: cautious, thrifty, careful, contemplative, intellectual, responsible. After he moved to Camrose that fall and enrolled at Augustana, I did my best to take care of him. I paid his bills, wrote his English essays, cleaned his apartment. He made me feel needed and important. He told me that he never would have gotten his life together if it hadn't been for me. He made me feel like his saviour, and I liked the role. He had such big dreams. He thought he would be happy when they all came true someday. I believed it, too. And I was proud to have such a gorgeous, fun boyfriend who was always the centre of attention. Me. Plain old Vanessa. With a gorgeous boyfriend.

The first time we visited his sister, in her luxurious one-bedroom high-rise in downtown Calgary, she made us two beds on the couches in the living room. We lay in the dark for a few minutes, and then Evan said, "I'm lonely. Come over here." We fumbled in the dark and realized there was just no room for two people to sleep side by side. Finally, he pulled me on top of him and wrapped his arms around me. We slept like that the whole night, without moving or waking. That's how well we fit together, like two halves of a whole.

~

When I was little, I used to spend my bus rides fantasizing about the school bus driver having a heart attack. I figured that the bus would be headed down a hill and Mr. Johnson would collapse to the floor unconscious. The bus would pick up speed and start to swerve on the gravel road. The kids would start screaming—even the Big Boys in the back. Nancy Bensmiller, who sat beside me, would pee her pants. Actually, she'd pee her tights, because that year Nancy's mom was dressing her in frilly dresses and curling her hair into Nellie Olsen-style ringlets.

Since Nancy and I sat right behind Mr. Johnson, I'd leap into the driver's seat. I knew how to drive my dad's standard half-ton, so I figured I could manage a school bus. I'd brake to a stop, and all the kids would cry and thank me. Mr. Johnson would recover, of course, and tell everyone about my heroism. I would get a medal from the Premier, and I'd get my story written up in the "Drama in Real Life" section of *Reader's Digest*.

I spent hours willing Mr. Johnson to keel over, but he never did. Instead, Nancy Bensmiller, who I was assigned to sit with, would stab me. She'd tell me to close my eyes and hold out my hands because she had a surprise for me. Then she stabbed a pin into my palm. When I opened my eyes, I saw tiny drops of blood oozing out of my skin. This happened day after day, me closing my eyes, putting out my hands, and getting stabbed. Not because I was stupid—I knew what was coming as surely as I knew I could drive that bus—but because I didn't know I was allowed to say "no" to her. I was afraid of her reaction if I refused to play along. I'd rather let her hurt me than risk making her mad at me.

~

I go for a haircut at a new shop that's opened up down the street from Megan's place. My stylist seems capable enough, but she's a little too friendly. She hammers me with questions as she cuts my hair: What do you think of the weather? Where do you work? Were you born here in Camrose? Where have you traveled? Frankly, I just wish she'd shut up. I give one-word responses, hoping she'll take the hint.

"Is your hair coloured?" she asks.

"No," I say.

"Wow. It must have been, like, white-blond when you were little!"

"Yeah, it was," I say grudgingly.

"You must have been, like, the cutest baby ever."

"I don't know." I shrug and close my eyes.

"Imagine if you had daughters with that bleach-blond hair! They'd be so beautiful, wouldn't they?"

My eyes fly open. I stare at her reflection in the mirror. She glances up and meets my gaze. "Don't you want to have kids someday?" she asks uncertainly.

Don't I want to have kids someday? Of course, I want to have kids someday! I wanted to have kids three years ago! But there's been a slight glitch in my plan to have kids someday! I shrug my shoulders again and say calmly, "Maybe someday."

"How many do you want to have?" she asks.

I shut my eyes and ignore the question. She keeps pulling the comb through my hair and taking little snips with the scissors. If I opened my eyes, I imagine I'd see her red-faced with embarrassed or miffed at my rudeness. But I don't open my eyes to check.

~

When I was in Grade 10, I used to baby-sit for Constable Meyner from the Onion Lake RCMP. His kids were four and two: Tina and Tyler. I baby-sat one night every weekend while Constable Meyner took his wife to Lloydminster for a date. I loved those kids. Sometimes we would walk out of the RCMP compound and down the dusty road to Audrey's Store to buy candy. I used to try to make it look like the children were mine by bossing Tina and Tyler around in a loud, motherly voice in the store, even though now I know that everyone must have known exactly whose kids they were.

Sometimes I used to daydream that Constable Meyner and his wife were in a horrible car accident on the way home, and they both died at the scene. I imagined that in their will they named me as the guardian of their children because I knew those kids better than anybody else. I would get to live in their house with Tina and Tyler until they grew up. There would be enough insurance money to pay for everything.

I was always half-disappointed when they came home safely, but I also felt awfully guilty because if they knew what terrible things I was thinking, they would never hire me again. I was fourteen. It seemed to me to be the most plausible means of getting children of my own, and I wanted children so badly, even then.

~

Rob, the sports reporter at the paper, has been flirting with me for the past few weeks. At least I think he has. It's been so long since anyone flirted with me that I can't tell for sure. But he often stops by my desk and asks me about my weekend. He's cute. He likes camping and hiking and has a Golden Retriever. Since everyone thinks it's time for me to "get back on the horse," I decide to make the first move at our staff Christmas party. It's so not me. But I've got nothing to lose.

After the turkey buffet, I keep my eye on him as he goes from table to table mingling with co-workers. I dance with some girls from graphics and have a few drinks. After a while, I see him standing alone, leaning against a pillar, drink in hand. Now's my chance. I slip off the dance floor, smooth my hair, straighten my dress, suck in my stomach, and head straight for him. I hold my head up and take long strides. I imagine Bridget Jones in her see-through blouse. I am a wanton sex goddess. He will be overcome by my beauty, and he'll be whispering sweet nothings in my ear by midnight.

"Hey, Vanessa, how's it going?" he asks.

"Good," I say. There is a pause. I plaster the sexiest smile I can muster onto my face and say huskily, "So do you dance or do you just watch?"

"I dance on occasion," he says. He takes a sip from his drink and looks out at the dance floor.

My sex-goddess mask cracks. I hear the pitch of my voice rising against my will as I say, "Well, do you want to dance *now*?"

He looks back at me. "I think I'd better stay here on crowd control duty," he says. "But thanks anyway."

My voice is positively screechy as I laugh it off and say, "Well, just thought I'd check." I hear a voice in my head telling me that *this* is why girls don't ask guys out: rejection!

"Are you feeling okay?" he asks. "Your eyes look really bloodshot."

"Um. Yeah," I say, confused. Not exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for.

I walk away, trying not to imagine how big my butt looks from his viewpoint. I hear Monica Geller shrieking, "I'm breezy! I'm breezy!" as I stumble into a table on my way back to the dance floor.

~

Christmas on the farm in Tulliby Lake is good. Same as always. My parents, my brother, Kent, his girlfriend, Laurie, and me—the fifth single wheel. We play Scrabble and crib. I eat too much. Mom gives me a sweater and a pair of cords from Sears. Dad gives me a tire pressure gauge and an emergency tool kit for my car. Kent and Laurie give me a really cool huge terra cotta vase that will have to go into storage until I have my own place again.

I head down to Calgary on Boxing Day, and I spend New Year's Eve with Claire. I offer to buy some champagne. Claire says that would just depress her even more. Matt and Megan are at some Lutheran retreat near Rocky Mountain House. Lindsay and Roxy are in Edmonton at dress-up formals with their boyfriends. Claire and I put Amy to bed at eight. We watch a few minutes of the celebrations from New York and Toronto, which just makes us feel worse about being single and at home. Claire says, “Let’s watch a movie instead.” We dig through her videos and put in the least romantic thing we can find—*What About Bob?*—and we paint our toenails bright red and laugh until we cry.

~

January

Sixty-two days after my thirtieth birthday, my butt falls. Just when I'm starting to calm down about the whole "turning thirty" thing, too. All the hysteria, moping, and weeping that preceded my birthday has subsided. Until now.

I've heard the jokes about female body parts "heading south." I've listened to older women complain, wearing a polite, condescending, it'll-never-happen-to-me smile on my face. But I get out of bed one morning to find that my jeans are uncomfortably tight around the thighs. I adjust my underwear, but no matter how I lift and tuck, a third of my buttocks sags below the elastic. I try different underwear. I try different pants. Still the same thing. I weigh myself. No change. There can only be one conclusion. My butt has gone to Lethbridge.

It feels awkward down there, bulging out under my panty lines, flapping along behind me wherever I go, like a saddlebag that hasn't been properly attached. I fear that before long, though, it will feel normal. I guess I'll have to accept the fact that thirty is not going to go by unnoticed. I wonder what's next.

~

Megan e-mails me at work. "Supper and a movie tonight? Call me!" I call her at work at the hospital and say I'd love to go. "Great," she says. "It's been too long." Although we live in the same house, we rarely do more than cross paths.

"What's Matt doing tonight?" I ask. In the silence that follows, I regret the question.

Megan tells me sheepishly, "He has a Bible study in Edmonton."

I didn't mean to make her feel bad. I back-pedal enthusiastically. "It'll be fun. I can't wait!"

I'm waiting for her when she walks into Boston Pizza. She is wearing a black mini-skirt and black tights, which accentuate her long legs. Her swinging black wool coat and cute Paddington bear-style hat make her look like she belongs in New York or Paris instead of small-town Alberta. She is beautiful. We catch up on Christmas and New Years news. We talk about her work at the hospital, which has been increasingly stressful since Ralph Klein began chopping health care spending several years ago. She tells me how Matt's seminary training in Edmonton has been going.

As I polish off my four-cheese fettuccine, I sigh and say, "We haven't done this for ages. I miss it."

"Yeah," she says. "Things have changed so much."

It's true. A year ago we were both single. My divorce was just being finalized. Megan, after a spell of bad blind dates, had happily given up on men, marriage, and motherhood. We ate at Boston Pizza at least once a week. We went to a movie (any movie!) every Tuesday night and to the Irish pub on Wednesdays. We made spur-of-the-moment trips to Edmonton to go to an 80's nightclub with Roxy and Lindsay or just for coffee for the two of us on Whyte Avenue. We loved the anonymity of sitting on Whyte Avenue, sipping our hot drinks, and watching the people in the crowd mill by. We enjoyed being the watchers, for once, instead of the watched. We relaxed in a way we never could in Camrose.

"Remember that Douglas Coupland reading in Edmonton?" I ask.

"Yeah," she laughs. "You were so determined to ask him for a date."

"A date! Are you kidding? I wanted to propose!"

"But all you could come up with is, 'Do you want some gum?'"

"That and the ever-impressive, 'You're my favourite author.'"

"I can't believe it didn't work!"

"Remember that night we went to Reds to see the Real McKenzies play?" I ask. I remember us sitting on bar stools scoping out the men and comparing what types of bad boys we were attracted to. She liked the ones who looked like starving artists—Ethan Hawke-types with tortoise-shell glasses and goatees. I liked the tough-but-wounded Johnny Depp look-alikes in Levi's and black leather jackets. We both, against our better judgement, were turned on by guys with cigarettes in their mouths.

I'm laughing, but I start to feel teary. I miss it so much. Now months go by without Megan and me doing anything alone together. She's more than a best friend; I love her like a sister. And so much has changed since she starting dating Matt. I try to sort out the words to tell her how I feel.

"My God!" she says suddenly, snorting. "We were pathetic! Talk about trying to fill a void in our lives." She bites into the last bit of her chicken foccacia sandwich. I look quickly down at my empty plate. I know she doesn't mean to hurt me, but it does hurt to see how easily she can dismiss the best period of friendship I've experienced in my life. Or maybe it just hurts because she's right, and because my void is still wide open.

~

The third weekend in January, I drive three hours to Tulliby Lake to spend the weekend on my parents' farm. Tulliby Lake is a strip of land about seventy-five kilometres north of Lloydminster, an oil town of twenty thousand famous for straddling the Alberta/Saskatchewan border. Tulliby Lake is hemmed in all sides: in the north by uninhabited forest; in the west by the line dividing the County of Vermilion River from the County of St. Paul; in the south by the North Saskatchewan River; and, in the east by the provincial border and the Onion Lake Indian Reserve.

According to ecological maps, Tulliby Lake clings to the edge of the arable parkland region. Five miles north of the river the boreal forest begins. The earth is sandy, with a thin layer of top soil to support small specimens of white spruce, trembling aspen, white birch, and a scraggly layer of undergrowth. The soil is too poor to till, and certainly couldn't sustain crops of wheat or even hay. The bush is dotted with small, shallow sloughs, generously labeled "lakes" on county maps. They gradually dried up throughout the 1990's and are all bone dry now. The land is Crown Land, owned by the federal government and rented out to community groups for pasture. My dad sends his two hundred-head Charolais-Angus-Hereford-cross herd to the Burke Lake Pasture each summer to forage over several sections of land.

Two miles south of this bushy land, there is a dramatic change in landscape. Rolling hills are covered with prairie wool and buck brush, with sporadic stands of trembling aspens, chokecherries, saskatoons, and pincherries. My father's land is covered in rich black soil, which would be fertile enough to nourish bounty crops if it weren't for the unending supply of rocks ranging from the size of baseballs to the size of cows and the fact that it never rains anymore. Well, I shouldn't say it *never* rains. But when I was little, snowdrifts towered high above my head, and today, as I look outside, I see that the ground is covered with only a couple inches of dusty snow. It promises to be another dry year.

On Saturday afternoon, my dad and I go down to Larson's Store to pick up some milk. We run into Kurt Hansen, an old classmate of my brother's, which wouldn't be interesting except that he's holding a baby with chubby red cheeks and big round eyes. While Dad talks to Kurt, I make goofy eyes at the baby, and she laughs at me. My abdomen aches with the joy of looking at her.

In the truck, I say, "Wow. Is that baby ever cute!" My heart actually hurts at the thought of never having a cute baby of my own.

"Yeah," Dad says. "She's probably one of the most beautiful babies I've ever seen. Mom and I were down here for coffee the other day, and Mom was playing with her. Afterwards, she said she can't wait until she has some grandchildren of her own."

"Really?"

Most of the women my mom's age in Tulliby Lake have at least a few grandchildren by now. Most of the kids I went to school with got married young and stayed in the community. Nancy Bensmiller has three little boys. Kerri Lynn has a boy and a girl. Jeanette has four kids—two of each. The kids see their grandparents every day.

At home, after Dad has gone out to do chores, I help Mom dry the dishes. "So," I say. "Dad tells me that seeing Kurt Hansen's baby makes you want some grandchildren of your own."

She sighs and leans against the counter. "He wasn't supposed to tell you that."

"Why not?" I ask.

"Well, I do wish I had some grandchildren, but I don't want to put any pressure on you kids." She looks at me, and her eyes are shining. "I know things haven't turned out the way you wanted them to." And I can see that her heart is breaking for me, and it breaks my heart to know how much I've disappointed her.

~

I know it's a cliché, but my wedding day was the happiest day of my life. But not just for the usual reasons. Sure, I was thrilled to be a princess for a day. Sure, I was wearing a beautiful dress. Sure, I was ecstatic to be marrying a guy I was crazy about. But it was the happiest day of my life because it was the last day that I still believed that everything really could turn out perfectly in the end. It was the last day I believed in magic wands and fairy-tale endings.

I expected to wake up the morning after my wedding a changed person, with a ready-made exciting and fulfilling life. It sounds naïve now, but I really did. I blame it on Hallmark and Disney and Hollywood and the fairy tales I grew up on. I blame it on the stories that end when the cowboy rescues the heroine, when the boy kisses the girl, when the prince marries the princess.

It's what comes next that is most difficult and, therefore, most interesting. Perhaps it's because it's so difficult that the movies end before the marriage begins. Chasing and dating are fun. Marriage is hard.

They say, "wherever you go, there you are." I had tried changing jobs and moving to new towns in an effort to find the new and improved me. But I never became the kind of girl who ate dinners with expensive red wine and climbed mountains on the weekends. No matter where I went, I still preferred Kraft Dinner to escargot and *Seinfeld* re-runs to extreme sports. Evan always promised me things would get better. When we moved. When we got a new apartment. When we bought our own house. When we had a baby. I believed him.

But we don't get a new life handed to us. Ever. Evan and I had the same arguments when we were married that we had when we were dating; they were just intensified because the stakes were so much higher. Money. Household chores. Sex. And I felt as restless and dissatisfied with myself as I had before. Marriage wasn't the magic wand I had hoped it to be. There is no magic wand at all. The only way to change a life is very slightly and very gradually through lots of very hard work. It takes so much effort, most of us don't even bother.

My wedding day was the happiest day of my life because I was still full of false hope. I know I'll never be like that again. I expected so much of marriage; it was inevitable that I would be let down.

~

Dad tells me about Dora Schneider, the wife of the new junior high teacher in Tulliby Lake. She's a writer. She's trying to get a book published. It's very exotic.

"I'm starting to think I'd like to try creative writing," I tell him, nervously, afraid of how he might react. "I mean, I've always written stories in my journal and stupid little poems and stuff, but there are creative writing classes at the university, and I think I might take one in the fall." I've just started taking a graduate English course at the U of A. Megan and I drive up on Tuesday nights after work. She visits Matt while I'm in class. I was so nervous about going back to school, but right from the first class, I loved it. Some of my classmates are talking about a creative writing course in the fall. I think if this term goes well, I might try to get into that course, too, if I could find something good enough to put in a portfolio.

"Really?" Dad says, mulling it over. "Imagine that! Being able to say I had a daughter who was a published author—wouldn't that be something!"

~

In junior high, I read *The Outsiders*, and Mr. Nielsen told me that S.E. Hinton had written the book when she was only seventeen. I decided then and there that not only would I become a writer, too, but I would publish my first novel when I was *sixteen* years old. I was determined to get something in print, so I started looking for possible markets. My parents had bought me a subscription to a Christian teen magazine that published a story by a reader each month. So I wrote a story about a teenage Christian girl who started dating a non-Christian boy. Her friends and family were very concerned. They warned her about dating someone who wasn't saved. She ignored them because she liked the boy so much. Before long, she ended up at a party where everyone was smoking marijuana. Her boyfriend pressured her to try it. She refused, called her parents, and escaped from the party. Then she admitted that her family and friends had been right all along, and she thanked God that the consequences of His lesson for her hadn't been more dire.

I was so proud of myself for my ability to tailor the story to my audience. And it was pretty well written, too, I figured, but I thought it might be a good idea to get a second opinion. I gave it to my dad, and as I watched him read it, I realized after just a page that he didn't like it. After finishing it, he thought for a moment, and then he said carefully, "You do know that not all non-Christians are bad people, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah," I said nonchalantly. "But that's what the people at the magazine believe, and that's the kind of stuff they'll publish."

"Well, that's fine for them. But is it what *you* want to be writing?

Suddenly, I was so ashamed of my story. He was right. I didn't believe a word of it. Instead of mailing them away, I burned the pages in the burning barrel.

~

Zack Knight calls me one night. We talk for about an hour and catch up. He tells me about his new position as a dj at Kix 106.3 in London. He's just moved to Ontario from Halifax for the job. I haven't heard from him for about four months this time, but when he does phones or e-mail, he leaves me floating in the clouds for days.

Place:	Halifax, Nova Scotia
Absolute Location:	44° 34' N 63° 35' W
Relative Location:	5007 km E of Camrose
Elevation:	70 metres
Region:	Atlantic Maritime
Average Temp.:	December -5°C; July +19°C
Annual Prec.:	1508 mm
Population:	113, 910
Area:	79 km^2
Pop. Density:	1441/km^2

I met Zack in Halifax almost five years ago, the summer before the summer I was married. I was visiting Lindsay, who was studying at Dalhousie. One night we went out with all her friends. In the car on the way downtown, it came up that this guy named Zack Knight would be at the pub that night. Lindsay's roommate, Tammy, was madly in love with him—actually, I think all of them had crushes on him—and she declared that that would be the night she'd make her move. When we got to the old-fashioned Celtic pub, called the Lower Deck, the girls scurried around chatting with people they knew. I sat on a wooden bench feeling lonely. I drank some draught beer and perked up a little. Then someone squealed, "There he is!" and Zack came over with a couple other guys. He certainly was cute—floppy, highlighted hair and a great white-toothed smile. There was standing room only, but I squeezed over on the bench to make room for his group. I caught Zack's eye and patted the bench. He sat down with his back to the table, talking to the guys he came with. His thigh was touching mine. A little later, one of Lindsay's friends offered to teach me the highland jig. I left the bench and gave it a good shot, but I was heavy on my feet like a Clydesdale. Zack was watching and laughing, but I didn't care that I was making a fool of myself.

Eventually the group tired of the Lower Deck, and we headed outside to walk along the waterfront. Lindsay and the girls walked ahead and Zack and his friends followed behind. I fell back until I was walking next to Zack, and we talked all the way along Barrington Street. It was hot out and damp, and it smelled of the sea. I found out he was twenty-six—a year older than me. He worked as a radio dj in the evenings and went to St. Mary's during the day, majoring in biology. He was from Margaree, on Cape Breton Island, and he said it was the most beautiful place on earth.

At Merrill's, a huge nightclub in a century-old stone building, we got a table, and Zack went to the bar and came back with a cooler for me. We kept talking. It was getting late, and I had two more coolers, and pretty soon my hand was on his knee, but he didn't seem to mind. The dj started playing slow songs, and he asked me to dance. (Or did I ask him? I can't remember.) He held my hand as we walked to the dance floor. It was a song I had never heard, and we slow-danced with our arms wrapped around each other, and he smelled like Obsession and sea salt. I was dizzy from the heat and the alcohol and his scent, and I leaned against him as we spun in circles.

Oh now feel it coming back again
Like a rolling thunder chasing the wind
Forces pulling from the center of the earth again
I can feel it

"What song is this?" I asked him, dreamily, head heavy on his shoulder.

"'Lightning Crashes.'"

"Oh. Does your radio station play it?"

"No," he said. "But we should. It's a good song."

"Yeah, it's an awesome, awesome song. I love it so much," I said, giggling self-consciously. The song ended, and we kept holding each other. When the lights came up, we laughed and made our way back to the table holding hands.

Lindsay said it was time to go. "Not yet," I begged. Zack asked what I was doing for the rest of my visit. I told him we were going to PEI for a few days. Leaving in the morning. He looked disappointed. "Well, will you give me a call when you get back to town? We could go for coffee or a movie. I'd really love to see you again." He scribbled his number on a scrap of paper.

"I'd love to see you again, too," I said, hanging on to his hand. I promised to call. Lindsay pulled me by the wrist towards the door.

"Don't forget to call!" he called after me.

"I won't!" I giggled giddily. I waved goodbye over my shoulder.

Back in the car, I flopped down in the back seat between Lindsay and Tammy. We drove in silence, and then I asked them, "Do you think it's possible to be engaged to one person and in love with another?" Lindsay elbowed me in the ribs, shutting me up. The other girls ignored me.

The next morning, in a foggy hangover, I pulled Zack's number out of my jeans pocket. It was written on the back of a Keith's Pale Ale label. What was I thinking? I was engaged! Thank God we were leaving for PEI. I packed fast. I didn't want to give him time to call. I couldn't deal with it. But I tucked the beer label into my address book, and as we drove up Highway 102 to Pictou, all I could think about was the way he smiled when he held me in his arms. And as I sat on the upper deck of the ferry chugging its way across the Northumberland Strait to Wood Island, PEI, I wrote in my diary about the magic of meeting Zack.

By the time Lindsay and I got back to Halifax, we had talked about Zack a lot. She was mad [illegible] me because a) I had a boyfriend and was acting like a tramp, and b) she didn't want her friends to judge her because I had a boyfriend and was acting like a tramp—especially since Tammy was so in love with Zack. Having said all that, though, she insisted that I phone him when we got back to Halifax. She didn't want him to think badly of her next time she saw him. I had only two nights before my flight.

"What should I say?" I asked Lindsay.

"You could start by saying you have a boyfriend, and you're sorry you made a fool of yourself. Tell him we just got back, and you're leaving first thing in the morning."

I put it off until the last night. Lindsay tuned into his radio station. A song ended and he said, "You're listening to Zack Knight!" and the sound of his voice made my heart pound. "Phone now!" Lindsay said frantically. "Then he won't be home, and you won't have to talk to him. You can leave a message, and at least it'll look like you tried."

So I called and said, "This is Lindsay's friend, Vanessa Stanley. Um, I met you at the Lower Deck a few days ago. Sorry not to call you sooner, but I just got back from PEI, and I fly out tomorrow."

"That's done," Lindsay said with relief. We listened to him on the radio until Tammy came home and Lindsay slammed the off button down. Ten minutes later the phone rang. Lindsay answered. I heard her say, *Oh. Um. Just a minute*. She covered the receiver and mouthed at me, *It's Zack. Oh my God!* I took the phone. Tammy and Lindsay were both staring at me. I looked around wildly for some privacy. I opened the metal folding doors of the coat closet, stretched the phone cord as far as I could, and crawled in, sitting on Tammy's and Lindsay's shoes. I shut myself in.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"Vanessa?" he said. "I got your message." He laughed. "You didn't have to remind me that you were Lindsay's friend! Like I haven't been thinking about you ever since Saturday night!"

I was trembling. "I thought you were on the radio right now," I said.

He paused, confused. "Well, it's pre-recorded. I just got home, but I'll be on the air for a few more hours."

"Oh."

He asked about my trip to PEI. He used to attend university in Charlottetown, so we talked about that. Finally he said, "I can't believe you're leaving tomorrow. I really wanted to see you again."

I knew that I should tell him about Evan, tell him the truth. But I couldn't. "I know, me too," I said.

"Can't we grab a quick coffee tonight?" he asked. "I know it's late."

"I can't. My plane leaves really early." It was a lie, but I was afraid to see him. I was afraid of what I might do and how I might feel and what it might mean for me and Evan and our wedding plans. Flirting in the bar was one thing, but coffee would be premeditated betrayal.

He sighed. "Okay. Well, send me a postcard when you get home."

"Okay," I said. "We'll be pen-pals." He agreed, and we exchanged addresses. Then we talked about Margaree and his university program, and Tulliby Lake, and my job at the newspaper.

Finally, Lindsay banged on the closet door. "It's been almost an hour," she hissed. I promised to write as soon as I got home.

The next day, after the plane took off and leveled, I plugged in my headphones, rested my head against the window, and looked down at the ocean and the ragged shoreline and then the rolling green hills of the Anapolis Valley. An Alanis Morissette song came on over the in-flight radio:

> *Well, life has a funny way*
> *Of sneaking up on you when you think everything's okay*
> *And everything's going right*
> *And life has a funny way*
> *Of helping you out when you think everything's gone wrong*
> *And everything blows up in your face.*

And I suddenly realized that in a few hours I would be three thousand miles away from Halifax. I might have made the biggest mistake of my life by leaving without seeing

Zack again. I wished I could turn the plane around. I wished I could turn the clock back twenty-four hours and tell him, *I need to see you, just to know for sure, just to know whether you are my One like I think you might be.* I wished I could ask him if his world had been turned upside down the way mine had. But I couldn't do any of these things, so somewhere over the Bay of Fundy, I pulled out my journal and wrote two dozen pages about Evan and Zack. The paper was smudged with tears.

I did write to him when I got home. I wrote anything I thought he'd find interesting about my life, I asked him twenty questions about his, and I told him about Evan. I kissed the envelope before I dropped it in the mailbox. He wrote back right away. He was surprised to hear about Evan, but flattered, too, to know I wanted to keep in touch in spite of that. He said he would always have fond memories of that night in Halifax. He answered all my questions: yes, he liked to travel; yes, he kept a journal; yes, he read Kurt Vonnegut; and, yes, he loved his job.

I wrote back immediately. I also called Air Canada and used my Air Miles to book a flight from Edmonton to Halifax for a week over Christmas break. I had to see him again. I had to know. I sent Lindsay a postcard to tell her I was coming.

By the end of October, I hadn't heard from Zack, but I had heard from Lindsay. She called to tell me that Zack had started dating a St. Mary's student named Karen, and it seemed pretty serious. She said I was welcome to come out for Christmas Break, but she would understand if I changed my mind. I changed my mind. I canceled the flight. I decided to put Zack out of my mind for good. *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.* It was crazy to be chasing a dream when I had Evan in real life. I threw myself into planning my wedding.

~

I drive down to Calgary to be Claire's date for her Christmas-in-January staff party. We drink watered-down paralyzers with her co-workers and dance to "YMCA" and "Rasputin." Late in the evening, a girl we don't know plops down in a chair at our table. "Any of you beautiful girls know how to play pool?"

I shrug. "Sort of."

"You don't need to be any good. We just need a fourth. C'mon."

I think, *Why not?* and follow her to the pool table. She introduces me to my partner, a probably-a-few-years-younger-than-me guy named Blake. The girl sinks four balls right off the break. I don't sink a thing on my turn. Neither does her partner. Or Blake. She's just about to shoot again when "Brown-Eyed Girl" comes on. She shouts, "I have *got* to dance to this song!" She drags her partner to the dance floor. Blake looks at me and shrugs, "Whaddya think?"

He's kind of cute. I remember my new mission to get "back in the saddle." "Might as well," I say.

On the dance floor, he takes my hand and puts an arm around my waist, leading me in a two-step. He smells good. It's been a long time since I've danced with a guy. He asks what I do. I tell him I write for a newspaper.

"Wow!" he says. "Cool job."

"I guess. What do you do?"

"I work in the mail room right now." I am surprised, but I hide it well, I think. He's very cute. Maybe it will be nice to date someone who is simpler.

"We should go for dinner sometime," he says. I smile and let him pull me a little closer.

"Maybe," I say lazily.

His smile fades a little. "You know," he says. "I'm going to be moved up to manager in two weeks. They kept screwing me around at my old job, but at my new job they've promised to make me a manager. I just have to put in some time in the mail room first."

"Okay," I say, pulling back a little. I didn't mean to offend him.

He rubs his hand across the small of my back, and I soften again. "We have to go for dinner," he repeats. "I have to see you again. I like you so much."

What a stupid thing to say. *I like you so much.* He doesn't even know me. What does that even *mean*? That he wants to have sex with me? Is that what dating is all about nowadays? The dj plays a slow song. Crazy Pool Girl has left the dance floor. Blake pulls me close to him and wraps both arms around my back. I smile politely. "I guess the game's back on," I say, nodding toward the pool table. "We'd better get over there."

"No," he says. "Let's keep dancing." His grip tightens. My stomach lurches with a twist of fear. *Calm down,* I tell myself. *It's no big deal.* I laugh and try to pull away, but he's holding me tight.

"Come on," I say giddily. "They're going to win if we don't get over there." Why am I still smiling? Why am I pretending this is all okay, trying to be a nice girl, when all I want to do is knee him in the crotch and run away? It occurs to me that it might be easier to just stay and dance, to not make a scene. I mean, surely nothing can happen in the middle of the dance floor with all these people around. His hand slides up under my shirt. With a burst of determination, I manage to unravel myself from his arms, but he grabs my wrist.

"What's the matter? I can tell you want it."

I yank him off balance. "That's enough," I say. My wrist is going to bruise. I see a look of defeat cross his faces. He smiles again, but there is anger behind it. He lets go and follows me off the dance floor.

"I'll be there in a minute," he says, as though nothing has happened. His eyes are dark. My body is on high alert. "We can talk more about that dinner." He heads to the men's room.

At the pool table, Crazy Pool Girl crows, "I sunk them all! You got beat by a *wo*-man!"

"Are you in*sane*?" I ask angrily. I grab my coat and look over my shoulder to make sure Blake hasn't emerged from the washroom. I tap Claire on the shoulder on my way past and give her a look. "It's time to go." I head for the door and double-check to make sure he isn't watching me. Still no sign of him. I duck around the side of the building to the alley and lean against the windowless brick wall. I try to pull myself together. Then I lock myself in the car and wait for Claire.

Claire arrives a few minutes later. "What happened? It looked like you were having a good time with that guy. He was all over you." I pull the car out onto the street.

"Not really," I say.

"What do you mean? I think he really liked you."

"I guess so," I say. I want to explain, but I just say, "He asked me out, but…" I have an immense headache.

“Well, are you going to?”

“No,” I say. “He works in the mail room.”

“So what?” she says, as though she would ever in a million years date someone who worked in a mailroom. “At this stage in the game, we can’t exactly be fussy. I’d kill to have someone fawning all over me like that.”

“He was a pig,” I say. “I’m not quite that desperate yet.” Almost, but not quite. This dating thing is more difficult than I expected.

~

February

I am seriously depressed about my lack of romantic companions. It's been two months since I decided to start dating again, and it will be Valentine's Day soon, and nothing!

Then Roxy and Jeffrey invite me up to Edmonton for drinks on a Friday night. Lindsay and David are there, and another couple who works with Jeffrey. Then Noah arrives: a guy who I've met a few times before, but he's always had one of a variety of pretty girlfriends in tow. I quickly clue in that I've been invited for him, and he's been invited for me. Not that I mind. He is gorgeous. I mean, movie star good looks—a perfect white smile, blue eyes, great hair. Before long he is sitting near me on the couch, and my heart is pounding like crazy, and I am smiling like a fool. All these long-dead feelings rush back, and I'm giddy and tingling. I feel more alive than I have in ages. He's polite and a sweet-talker, and he makes sure my drink is refilled and brings me appetizers. We make small talk until eleven, and then he asks if I want to take off and go for a coffee. I do. He has a yellow Mustang. He opens the car door for me.

"Do you want to go to Starbucks, or do you want to stop at my place? I make a great cup of coffee."

A rush of excitement floods through me. I don't drink coffee. "Your place sounds good," I say. I can't believe I'm saying it.

For the first time since my divorce, I have sex. I have sex on the first date. I feel so grown-up and mature. No more hang-ups about the sins of premarital sex. No more high-school-style games. No coercion, force, or shame involved. He wants to have sex. I want to have sex. It's that simple. He takes me back to Roxy's at three in the morning. I kiss him goodbye. He says he'll call. I decide I don't care whether he does or not. I feel sophisticated, independent, and free. A feminist of the new millennium. In control of my own sexuality. No strings. No attachments.

By the next evening, back home in Camrose, I am wondering if he'll call. He does. We talk on the phone for an hour every night. He hasn't been to college. He prefers car shopping and video games to reading. His favourite movie is *Deuce Bigalo, Male Gigolo.* We don't have a lot in common, but he sure is sweet. And cute. He may not be the kind of guy I'm looking for in the long run. But he will be perfect for what my psychologist called a transition relationship, better known as a "rebound." We go on more dates. I go up to Edmonton and stay at Roxy's because he doesn't want to drive his car on the "country roads" out to Camrose. We have more sex. I think, when I get bored, I'll end it. In the meantime, it will be good for me. Build up my confidence. Get me back on the right track.

He takes me to Characters for Valentine's Day. He talks about a ski trip and meeting his parents. He tells me he's "head over heels." I start to get attached. It feels so good to be part of a couple again. I forget the rebound idea and start to wonder if we'll have the wedding in Edmonton or Camrose. I hope I can have two bridesmaids—Megan and Claire. I tell my friends that I have a boyfriend. I tell my parents. I ask Megan if she and Matt want to double date. She says they will. Roxy and Lindsay congratulate me on "moving on." Only Claire throws cold water on my excitement: "This is all a little fast, don't you think? You've only just met him. Don't invest too much too soon." I pout and decide not to talk to her about Noah anymore. Serves her right.

One night, out of the blue, he says, "It's really weird, that you're divorced."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just weird. I haven't told my parents yet. And I realized I'm not sure how to break it to them."

"Oh." It's weird for me, too, but unfortunately I don't have much choice about the matter.

I don't hear from him again. He stops calling, just like that. He wasn't supposed to be the one to stop.

~

I call Noah. I leave a message, self-consciously because I know he has call display, and he might be screening me. But he doesn't call back. I cry for four days straight. It occurs to me that in the midst of the sex and the talk about the house over the lake, we never bothered to clarify the status of the relationship. He was never even my boyfriend, really. I can't even say that we broke up. I guess he liked the "no strings" model even more than I did.

It is impossible for me to not care about someone whose face is two inches from mine when I wake up in his arms in the morning. And maybe, despite what *Ally McBeal* and *Friends* would have me believe, this is not a bad thing. I feel angry and used. But it's entirely my own fault. I made a lot of assumptions and believed what I wanted to believe. I vow I'll never have sex on the first date again. Whether I want to or not. And, most importantly, I'll never let anyone else make that choice for me either.

~

As usual, the first thing I do when I walk in the door after a late evening at work is check the answering machine. No messages. I pick up the phone, pause, put it down, and pick it up again. I dial *69. *The last number to call your line was 780-222-6987.* I slam down the phone.

I rush into the living room where Megan sits watching *Ally McBeal*. "Noah called!" I announce breathlessly. "Well, he didn't leave a message, but I did star-six-nine, so I know he called."

"Star-six-nine?" she repeats, eyebrows raised, still staring at the TV.

"Why would he call and not leave a message?"

She turns to stare at me. "Vanessa, I have no idea," she says, in the exhausted, condescending tone she would use with a four-year-old who has just asked for the eighteenth time why dirt is black. I am surprised into silence. She has never used this voice with me before.

I continue, self-consciously. "Well, it's just that I don't know what to do. I mean, he hasn't called for almost a week. But he doesn't know that I know that he called, so if I phone now, he'll think I'm calling again without him having called. Out of turn, you know? I can't tell him I star-six-nined him, or he'll think I'm pathetic, right?" Even as I say this, I know I sound like I'm thirteen years old.

Megan sighs, "I really don't know what you should do. Anyway, I've got to call Matt and get to bed. I have to be at the hospital early in the morning." She gets up, taps the *off* button, goes to her bedroom, and shuts the door. She opens it a crack and says, "Vanessa, you've only known this guy for a few weeks! Don't let it get to you." And then she's gone again.

I slump on the couch in the spot she just left. It's funny how much things have changed. How easily she can forget. I mean, it was only a few months ago that I would frantically tell Megan that some guy had talked to me, or hadn't talked to me, and she would patiently go through all the possibilities and their implications until we had chosen a course of action. It was only last summer that she got that four-page e-mail from Graham, an old Augustana friend who is now a Ph.D. student at UWO in London, and we printed the e-mail twice so we could both go through it individually with highlighters to write comments and questions in the margins, and then together we tried to figure out what all of his convoluted ramblings actually *meant*. But that was all pre-Matt. L.B.M. Life Before Matt. It wasn't all that long ago, but everything is different.

The next night I am still obsessing about Noah. It no longer matters that he was a rebound guy. It no longer matters that he wasn't marriage material, anyway. What matters is that I have been rejected. Again. I am starting to wonder if any guy will ever love me, if I am, in fact, lovable. I tell Megan, "I don't know what to do. How can he just not like me all of a sudden? What's wrong with me?"

She says, soothingly, "There's no point in worrying about it. I mean, if he's busy, you're just wasting your time worrying because he'll call as soon as he can. If he's not interested, well, you're still wasting your time, because worrying about it won't change his mind and make him interested. If it's not meant to be, you can't change it."

Her answer is logical. It makes sense. It may even be right. But I miss the Megan who would have said, "Men are slime!" and poured us a couple coffee mugs of wine and spent an hour with me reviewing every conversation and encounter I've ever had with Noah. It's childish behaviour, I know, for a couple of thirty-year-olds, but, as they say, misery loves company. I want her to tell me that he's a jerk, and that I'm wonderful, and that lucky Mr. Right will come along soon.

Now that Megan has a boyfriend, it's easy for her to be logical and even philosophical about life and love. She has faith that things do work out. How many times has she said that she and Matt were meant to find each other? She has the luxury of believing in Fate or Divine Intervention. I'd like to have her faith that things will work on in the end. But I'm still single, and I'm afraid to put my future in the hands of Fate or God. I've been hurt so much that I can no longer be that trusting. I'm too frightened that it *won't* all work out in the end.

Megan gives me looks that promise that once I have a boyfriend, I'll look back on all this and laugh. She has entered the world of Smug Marrieds. I'm envious that she is suddenly so content. But I'm puzzled, too. The Megan I used to know, the one who read Naomi Wolf and Gloria Steinem, seemed so independent, and yet now her life revolves around Matt, and she seems totally happy. Is that what it will take to make me happy, too?

I try to be glad for Megan. I truly do. But in the midst of my gladness, I just feel sorry for myself. I miss the pyjama parties watching *Anne of Green Gables* and eating pizza. I miss Chinese food on Saturday nights. Now that Noah is out of the picture, I feel just as awkward as I did before on couple nights with Megan, Lindsay, and Roxy and their boyfriends. Again, I'm the only single one. After all these post-college Game-of-Life years of building careers and relationships alongside everyone else, I have suddenly taken a detour that sent me back to the beginning of the game, and now I'm playing all alone. I know I should put on a brave face, embrace my singleness, and endure the barrage of offers to "fix me up." But I graciously decline with vague excuses about bringing home extra work for the weekend. I put on my pjs, make a big bowl of popcorn, and watch *The Sound of Music* alone. At midnight, I turn to *Blind Date*, which makes Noah seem not as horrible as he could have been, and I fall asleep on the couch to *Saturday Night Live*.

~

The night after my talk with Megan, I make myself a promise. I decide that I am not going to go on another date for six months. After coming so far after the divorce, I can't take the risk of getting wrecked again over some guy I barely know, like I almost did with Noah. I am obviously not ready. I still have too much baggage, too many things that still need to be sorted out. I am still too sad.

~

When my grandmother died two years ago, I felt like half of me shriveled up. I was drowning in sadness. I was inconsolable. At the funeral, my brother helped me walk without falling down. Afterwards, I went to my parents' place to be with my family. I asked Evan to come with me. I needed him to hold me while I fell asleep. He decided he couldn't stay the night; there was so much work to be done back in Camrose, and it just couldn't wait. He left directly from the funeral and my brother, Kent, drove me to the farm, and we spent the night there. I had horrible nightmares.

Kent drove me to Camrose the next day on his way back to Edmonton. I beat Evan home. I arrived at noon, numb and swollen-faced, my head pounding. He came dashing in an hour later, grinning. He had had the best night ever, he told me. He had picked up a hitchhiker on the Yellowhead, some guy from Ontario. They guy was headed to Edmonton, so Evan figured he might as well drive him the whole way. They had supper at Hooters in West Edmonton Mall and went for drinks on Bourbon Street. Evan was too drunk to drive, so they crashed in a hotel. The guy, Vince, a tree planter, was so cool. They were going to keep in touch.

I couldn't have been more shocked if he had told me he spent the night on Mars. I couldn't think of anything to say. I stared at Evan dumbly, and he looked like a blurry stranger through my swollen eyes.

I guess that was the beginning of the end.

~

I didn't see my husband for seventeen days after the funeral. He couldn't cope with my grief. He was out of the house each morning before I woke up, and he came in long after I'd gone to bed. He slept on the couch so he wouldn't disturb me. I cried myself to sleep every night, missing my grandmother, missing him. I scratched my face so hard it left marks. Somehow pain on my skin was easier to bear than pain inside. I kicked the walls and screamed. I was angry. I was sad. I was lonely.

Once I woke up in the middle of the night and felt achingly empty. I got up and looked for him in the living room. I wanted to ask him to come to bed. He still wasn't home. For a long time, I stared out the window blankly, watching the streetlight cut the dark. He still didn't come home.

I went to the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. I looked old. And fat. And very, very tired. I grabbed his can of shaving cream and wrote on the mirror in huge letters, *I NEED YOU!!* I crawled back into bed. I started to write in my journal. Through the wash of my tears, I got lost, and my pen slipped in my hand and the words slipped off the page and streaked across my stomach in dark blue ink. I gazed at them for a moment. Then I put aside my journal and kept going on my skin, writing line after line, faster and faster. I covered my body. On my abdomen I wrote, *What will it take??? What do I have to lose to make you love me?* and down my leg, I scrawled, *5 lbs.? 10 lbs.? 20 lbs.? 40 lbs.? 80 lbs.? All of me???*

He woke me later by switching on the bedroom light. "What did you write on the mirror? I can't read it."

I put my head under my pillow and didn't answer.

"It's all dripping," he said impatiently. "It looks like, 'I know you' or 'I hate you.' What is it?"

"Never mind," I mumbled into the sheets, pulling them around me like a tent. I was too proud and too ashamed to say it out loud.

"Talk to me," he said. I heard him walk over to the bed and then felt the cool air rush in as he ripped the sheets away from me. I lay naked and blinking in the harsh light. He stared at me in disbelief, trying to decipher the blurred blue ink that covered my arms, breasts, stomach, and legs. His eyes were wide.

"Fuck!" he said, furiously and sadly, as he backed away. "I don't understand you at all." And he went to sleep on the couch.

~

I ate. In the evenings I spent home alone listening for the door to open and Evan to come home, I ate. When I was angry, which was much of the time, I ate. When I was sad, which was all the time, I ate. I could eat a plate of mozza sticks, a medium pizza, and a piece of cheesecake all in one sitting. I could eat a tub of Häagen Dazs ice cream in a TV commercial break. No matter how much I ate, I couldn't fill myself up. The pounds started to pile on. I bought new clothes. Size ten, then size twelve. I had worn a size five wedding dress a year and a half before.

As though to emphasize my growing ugliness, Evan became more attractive. First it was trendy indigo jeans. Then he dyed the tips of his spiked hair blonde. Then a new leather jacket. New shoes.

"How are you paying for all this?" I asked.

"Listen," he said. "I'm the one working seven days a week. Can't I reward myself a little?"

He bought $150 designer sunglasses. I didn't even own a coat worth $150. Girls noticed him on the street as we walked by. I imagine them wondering how a hot guy like him got stuck with a fat cow like me. He didn't like to hold hands in public.

~

I was obviously out of control, so I decided to go to a counselor. I tried a psychologist from Edmonton who had an ad in the Yellow Pages. Elizabeth. She was tall and super-thin, and she wore a two-piece grey tweed suit.

She said no wonder my husband spent so much time away from home, because I was obviously too clingy. She said I needed to get a life of my own. I needed to get out and meet people. She said if my husband saw that other people wanted to spend time with me, he would want to spend time with me, too. She said that gaining weight was disrespectful to myself, and that I was teaching my husband to disrespect me by letting it happen. As she continued to ask me questions, I became more and more careful about editing my answers. I was ashamed for her to know how horribly messed up I really was.

She gave me a homework assignment. First, I was to buy a membership at the gym and go at least four times that week. By the end of the week, I was to choose someone from the gym to ask out for coffee.

Go to the gym? Ask a stranger for coffee? Obviously this woman didn't get me at all. I didn't go back.

~

They say the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Eventually, I stopped kicking the walls and scratching my face and crying myself to sleep. I knew that if I allowed myself to grieve that way any longer, I would die from the pain. I began to think of Evan as a roommate who wasn't around much. I stopped expecting him to be home or asking where he'd been. I stopped begging him to leave work early so we could spend an evening together. I read novels and mowed the lawn and started refinishing the hardwood floors. I watched TV. I ate. Anything to keep busy, to keep from thinking or feeling. I saw it as self-preservation. He saw it as indifference.

~

I auditioned another counselor. Marge. She was plump and disheveled, and I liked her immediately. I told her about my husband who couldn't stand to be in the same house with me, who drank every night, who didn't want to have sex with me, who spent all of our spare money (and then some!) on friends and toys and alcohol.

She listened—really listened—while I talked. I felt I could tell her everything, and I did. After I finished, she didn't tell me to shape up. She told me what I didn't even realize I needed to hear: "I'm going to answer the question you are asking without asking. You want to know if you're crazy. You're not crazy. The way you are feeling is completely normal." I felt tears rising, partly because I was so relieved to finally have my feelings acknowledged, but partly because I had hoped there really was something wrong with me, something that could be fixed by an assignment or even a drug. If feeling like this was normal, and the best I could hope for, I didn't know whether I wanted to go on.

Then she said, "Your husband's behaviour sounds very strange. Is there any possibility that he could be having an affair?"

"No," I said firmly, as tears escaped and raced down my cheeks. "Things are bad between us, sure, but Evan would never do that to me. He wouldn't."

~

I go for my annual medical check-up: blood tests, pap smear, the whole works.

My doctor asks if my periods have been regular. They haven't, I tell her. They've been really wacky lately. Forty-five days one month, fifteen the next. I tell her I've been worrying about it. She recommends I start taking the pill to regulate my cycle again. As she writes out the prescription, I ask, "So you're sure it's nothing serious?"

"No," she assures me. "Nothing to worry about at all."

"I'm thirty, you know," I remind her.

"Really, there's no need to panic. I mean, sure, if you were trying to get pregnant, we'd run a few tests, but you're not, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Okay," I say, relieved. Nothing to worry about.

The enormity of what she said doesn't hit me until I leave her office and get into my car. *If I was trying to get pregnant?* What does that mean? Could I have a fertility problem? If I'm having problems now, what will it be like in five years or however long it takes me to find a partner and get married? My clock is ticking.

~

March

Claire once said that you know your biological clock is ticking when you're disappointed to get your period instead of relieved. I fantasize about being pregnant. I mean, yes, Noah and I used a condom, but it's not impossible. One of those little suckers could have gotten through somehow. It seems possible enough that I start to believe it's true. It'll be a girl, I think. She'll have his thick hair and dark blue eyes.

Don't get me wrong, I don't imagine getting Noah back. In fact, I don't even plan to tell him at all. I just want his baby. I wonder if my parents would let me move home. After all, they're desperate for grandchildren aren't they? I look at baby clothes at the Bay.

My little fantasy lasts about five days. Then my period comes. My hopes for having a baby, this time anyway, are flushed away. Following my doctor's orders, I swallow the first pale blue pill from my pack of Tricyclen, even though I have absolutely no need for protection.

~

It's impossible to be thirty and not be obsessed with *the* clock. Megan, Roxy, and Lindsay and I did it the modern way. We waited. We went off to college when all the other girls from our small rural hometowns were staying home to get married. We got degrees and graduated when those girls were having babies. We got good jobs; we got promotions. We made good money; we bought RRSPs. We traveled to Europe or Asia.

We did things right. We managed to evade the trap our parents feared most for us—getting pregnant too young and limiting our options.

This past year, when all four of us have been turning thirty, none of us is so sure that we did the right thing. Some of our recently-married college friends have found that it's not so easy to have kids when you want them. Rhea, a graphic designer in Vancouver, has had three miscarriages in the past two years. Donna, a lawyer in Calgary, has been on fertility drugs for over a year with no luck. Lisa, an engineer in Fort McMurray is on the list for invitro.

In Tulliby Lake, some of my old classmates have kids in junior high.

After years of successfully evading the burden of parenthood, we are now afraid we will never have the opportunity to be mothers. Megan mentions that she should marry Matt soon if she wants to have kids before she's thirty-five. Roxy says that if Jeff doesn't start thinking about kids soon, she needs to find someone who will. I always thought I'd be married with two kids by the time I hit thirty. Now I will be lucky if I can have a baby by the time I'm thirty-five. I need to meet a guy, date him, get engaged, and get married in less than five years. I have taken so much for granted. We were smug about the idea of fitting a baby into our plans, rather than changing our lives for an unplanned pregnancy. We were taught that we were in control of our bodies. We used birth control and figured that when our careers were ready, our relationships strong, and our bank accounts full, we'd go off the pill and our eggs would be fertilized at our convenience. It never occurred to us that our bodies might have other plans.

~

Megan always teases me about Matt's younger brother, Scott. "Just wait 'til we get you two together!" she says.

"Isn't he, like, twelve years old?" I say.

"He's twenty-five," she says. "That's only five years younger than you."

"It might as well be a million," I argue. "A twenty-five-year-old guy is not interested in the same things as a thirty-year-old woman. Trust me. It'll be ten years before he knows if he's ready to get married. I don't have that kind of time to waste."

"You never know," she says serenely. "Sometimes things don't happen as you expect."

"We'll see," I say, just to appease her, knowing there's no chance in hell of it ever happening.

~

Megan is bursting with excitement when she gets home from Edmonton on a Sunday evening. "Look what I found!" she says. She hands me a purple and yellow flyer.

"What is it?"

"Just look at it!" she says. "It's a creative writing class just for women. Who knew there were such things?"

I open the brochure and read about a week-long creative writing course for women in Edmonton in May. I glance over the workshop titles: memoir, personal essays, poetry, family history. "It looks kinda cool," I say skeptically. I'm sure I'm not a good enough writer to do something like this. I'd die of humiliation. I'd be laughed out of class.

I flip to the back. "Five hundred dollars! There's no way I can afford that!" I read a little further and sigh with relief. "Besides, the deadline for registering was Saturday. It's too late."

"Don't worry," Megan says. "You're already signed up. I called and put you on the list. You just need to call a woman named Suzanne tomorrow and give her your credit card number. There's the phone number."

"I don't know. It's probably for published novelists. Creative writing is a lot different than the writing I do at the paper. You know the kind of drivel I write: 'This week Mrs. Olga Oleson returned from visiting her son in Minneapolis. She will be displaying photos of her new granddaughter at the card party at the Seniors' Centre on Friday night.'"

"Read the first page. It's for anyone." Megan says, tapping the brochure. "Vanessa, this is absolutely perfect for you. You always say you want to write a novel someday. Well, why not now? It will be so good for you. Go. For me."

"You really think so?"

"I really do."

That evening I think about the course. Should I or shouldn't I? I keep changing my mind. Sure, I always say I want to write a novel. And I dream about taking the creative writing class at the U of A next fall. But the thought of actually signing up for a course that starts in less than two months is terrifying. What if I'm not ready? What if I'm not good enough?

But I decide to trust Megan. On Monday morning, I call Suzanne, with my MasterCard in my hand.

~

In one of my first sessions with my counselor, Marge, she suggested that Evan and I try date nights to revive our relationship. At that point I was willing to try anything. I was nervous about suggesting it to Evan, but he surprised me by actually agreeing to it. "If it will help you feel better, of course I'll do it," he said. So we made a plan—every Tuesday night would be our night. Nothing else would be allowed to interfere, including work.

On the first Tuesday, I waited for 8 o'clock to roll around so Evan could get off work. I rummaged through my closet looking for something to wear and realized I didn't own a single thing that could come close to making me look sexy. I settled for some lipstick, but it couldn't hide the fact that I was fat.

At Boston Pizza, we ordered drinks and sat across from one another in silence. "Well, what did you want to talk about?" Evan asked. "Isn't this what you wanted?" I didn't know what I wanted. All I knew was that I wanted to spend time with him, and now that I had him all to myself, I couldn't think of a thing to say. I sighed. I felt tears coming.

He softened. After a few more moments of silence, he smiled, lowered his voice, and said, "So, what's your name?"

I looked at him blankly.

"I'm Evan. What's your name?"

I smiled in spite of myself. "Vanessa."

"Come here often?" he asked.

I laughed. "Once in a while."

In the two-hour conversation that followed, I found out things I had forgotten about Evan and things I had never known. And in the first time in a long, long time, we had fun together. We left holding hands. He opened the car door for me. After he parked the car in our driveway, he asked shyly, "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

I considered it. "Sure." He gave me a peck on the cheek. "Do you want to come in for a drink?" I asked.

"Are you trying to seduce me?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"Sounds good."

After we made love, he pulled me against him and muttered, "We should have a baby, Vanessa." Then he started to snore softly. I lay awake wide-eyed in the dark. *Everything's going to be okay,* I thought, *Everything will be okay.* I repeated it like a prayer.

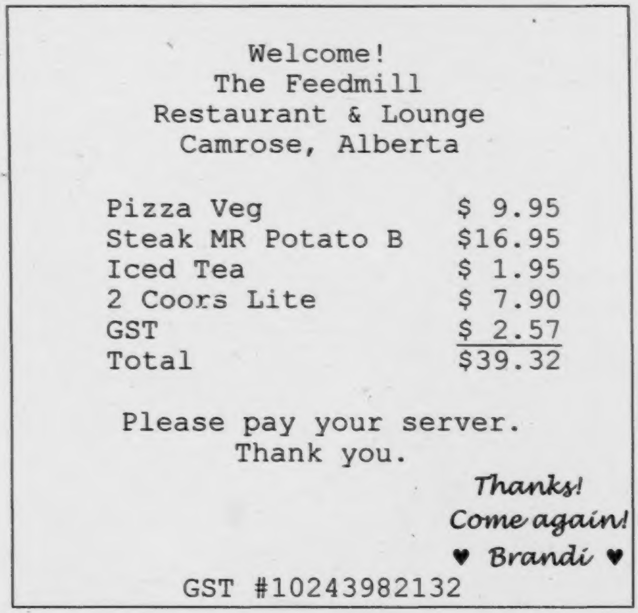
~

On the second date night, Evan and I went to the lounge at the Feedmill. It was my choice. He had tried to talk me into going to BP instead, but I insisted, saying it was more romantic at the Feedmill. No sports on TV, for one thing. Evan was sullen throughout the meal, and we barely talked. I tried to keep up a conversation, rattling on about work and my pottery class, but there was only so much I could do. I didn't want this date to be a total failure or he wouldn't go on one again. I wished it was like last week's date, but it seemed as though things had gone back to normal with us.

The waitress chatted with us, being almost overly friendly, but he ignored her, too. When we were finished, she brought the bill and set it in front of him. I reached for it. "My treat," I said. "My choice."

"I'll take care of it," he said, trying to grab it from me.

"It's all right," I said, flipping over the bill and looking for the total.



Welcome!
The Feedmill
Restaurant & Lounge
Camrose, Alberta

Pizza Veg	$ 9.95
Steak MR Potato B	$16.95
Iced Tea	$ 1.95
2 Coors Lite	$ 7.90
GST	$ 2.57
Total	$39.32

Please pay your server.
Thank you.

Thanks!
Come again!
♥ Brandi ♥

GST #10243982132

"Hey, look at this!" I teased. "I think the waitress likes you. She put little hearts by her name."

"Knock it off," Evan said tiredly.

"C'mon," I said, trying to flirt. "I don't blame her. You're so handsome."

He let out a tight laugh. "Right. As if *you* think that!"

On the third Tuesday, Evan came home from work with his friend, Aaron, in tow. I pulled him aside. "This defeats the purpose!" I whispered.

"Well, I can't uninvite him now," he hissed. "We already decided to go to Cadillacs for a beer. You can come with us, if you want."

"I can come *with* you?" I say. "It's our date night!"

"Well, no one is saying you can't spend it with me."

"I don't want to hang out in a bar on a Tuesday night."

"Suit yourself. But we're going." And they did. Without me.

~

I fall in love with Lance Bass. You know, the good-looking, bleached-blonde guy from the pop group *NSYNC. The Sweet, Shy One. Lance is twenty-one years old.

Nine years younger than me, but who's counting? I read in Claire's *People* magazine that he has two Jet Ski's but no girlfriend to ride with. Megan picks up an *NSYNC poster for me at Zellers. I promptly hang it on my bedroom door. Roxy's boyfriend, Jeff, uses his graphics program at work to make me a fake membership in the I-Love-Lance Club, complete with a photo of us together on the back.

When I see people I haven't seen since the divorce, acquaintances from town, people I've interviewed for the paper, they treat me carefully, like I'm a delicate eggshell that might break if it's dropped. "How are you *doing*?" they ask. Then they say, "Are you *seeing* anyone yet?" which, to them, means the same thing.

I smile and get all giddy. "Yeah, I *am* seeing someone. Actually, I have a picture of us somewhere." They beam with relief. I pull my laminated fan club card out of my wallet. "This is my new boyfriend!" I say, handing them the card. "His name is Lance." They look at me as if they don't know whether it's more appropriate to laugh or to send me to the psychiatric hospital in Ponoka. I don't know either.

Lance is perfect for me. He is so good-looking: trendy spiked hair, beautiful blue eyes, a shy smile. He seems sincere in his Much Music interviews. He plays basketball for charity. He helps young artists get started in the business. What's not to like? The most perfect thing about him, of course, is that there is absolutely zero chance that I will ever meet him. That means there is zero chance that he will ever have the opportunity to reject me. That's why I love him.

So when people sidle up to me, whispering, "I've just thought of the perfect guy for you," I tell them, "That's really sweet of you, but I'm very happy with Lance right now."

~

One evening Megan comes out of her room in tears. She's just hung up on Matt, and she holds the phone in her hand, letting the dial tone buzz on and on so he can't phone back.

"I've got to get out of here," she says. "Let's go for a drink."

"BP?" I ask, even though I am just starting to dig into an article that will take me all evening; my new boss has "requested" that it be on his desk at 8:00 a.m.

"Where else?" she says, trying to smile through her tears. She puts the phone on the table, still buzzing. We grab our coats and keys. When we're ready to leave, she puts the phone back in its cradle and races out. It starts to ring immediately, but I follow her out and lock the door.

I offer to drive so she can drink. In the car, I ask, "What happened?"

Her tears start again, and she shakes her head. "Not yet."

"Okay," I say, and we drive on in silence.

At Boston Pizza, I order an iced tea, and she orders a rye and Coke. When the waitress brings our drinks, we give her our food orders, and she takes the menus. Megan takes a long sip of her drink. She leans back in her chair and takes a deep breath. "I don't think this thing with me and Matt is going to work," she says.

I suck on my drink to buy myself a moment think. The rush of relief—almost happiness—I feel takes me by surprise, and I'm not sure where it's coming from. Don't react, I tell myself, don't say anything, just let her talk. "Really?" I say. "Why?"

"We just had this horrible talk," she says. "Well, actually, it started on the weekend. We were talking about our relationship, and he said that he was still trying to get his head around the idea that I wasn't his ideal." She chokes. "Well, it kind of made sense at the time, and we were talking about how no one is perfect, but when I came home, I realized that I don't think I can stand being with someone who is so disappointed that I don't live up to his expectations. I mean, he thinks my job is beneath me. He questions whether my faith is as strong as his. He doesn't like that I drink, or that I swear, or my— " She looks at me and breaks off. Maybe I'm just paranoid, but I can't help but wonder if her sentence was going to end with *my friends.*

I concentrate on keeping my mouth shut. Now is not the time for advice.

"I mean, my God, I can't even say 'Oh, my God!' anymore without thinking I might go to hell!"

No matter what I think she should do—and in my gut I wish she'd break up with him—I know she needs to do what's right for her. I try to conceal my prejudice. "I can see how crappy that would make you feel. How do you feel about Matt? Is he your ideal?"

"Well, he's certainly not perfect, but at this stage in the game, I realize that no one is. I love him dearly, and I can't imagine not having him in my life. But he has this vision of the ideal pastor's wife that God has waiting for him somewhere, and it's not realistic."

"It's funny how girls are supposed to be the sappy, romantic ones, but it's guys who are obsessed with finding The One."

She nods through her tears. She heaves a great sigh. "I just hate this constant feeling of not being good enough. I keep trying and trying, but it just makes me so tired."

"Well," I say, taking a breath. "I'm obviously no expert on relationships, so take anything I say with a grain of salt. But I think the main thing in a relationship is that you not only love the person you're in it with, but it makes you love the person you *are* when you're in it." She slumps back in her chair, sobbing. The people at the next table look over at us. "I'm sorry," I say. "I don't want to make you more upset." I cover her hand with mine.

"It's not you."

We don't talk for a while. We finish our drinks. When the waitress returns, Megan orders another rye and Coke. "Let's talk about something else," she says. "Tell me something." So I babble about work and how frustrated I am with the new boss and the lame articles I'm writing. Our food comes—fettuccine for me and a Thai chicken salad for her—and we decide to go for a movie after supper. "I need to numb my brain," Megan says.

"You remember I told you about the new doctor who asked me out a few weeks ago?" she says suddenly, after our plates have been cleared.

"Yeah?"

"Well, it just makes me think. I mean, Matt is great. But that doctor is so cute, and he's easygoing and open-minded. Well, it just makes me think. Maybe this isn't my last chance. Maybe there would be other guys."

"Of course there would," I say. "You know that, don't you? You are beautiful and smart and creative. You could find another guy just like that."

"I just feel so lucky to have Matt. He's so wonderful."

"Of course, he's wonderful," I say. And who can deny that Matt is a compassionate, sensitive, caring, polite, thoughtful man? I like him. That's not the point. I mean, just because I think both Queen Elizabeth II and Chris Rock are great people, it doesn't mean I think they'd make a good couple. "But just because he is a great guy doesn't mean he's the guy for you. I have no doubt you'd find someone else. You're not the only lucky one, you know. Matt is lucky, too. Any guy would be lucky to have you."

"So even if Matt doesn't think I'm good enough, maybe someone like that doctor would?"

I pause for a moment. I realize we are having two separate conversations. I thought we were talking about her deciding if she wants to be with Matt. But she is talking about the possibility of Matt deciding he doesn't want to be with her. She's not necessarily interested in the doctor, she just wants to know if he could be interested in her. I choose my words carefully. "Megan, Matt is not the only one who gets a say in this. You have a say, too. I mean, *you* might decide that Matt isn't right for you. You have to make sure you're getting what you need out of the relationship. Don't just let yourself be carried along. It's your life." So much for being an impartial listener, but I don't even come close to saying what I really want to, that I am very afraid that if she marries Matt someday, she will be as desperately unhappy as I was with Evan, just for different reasons.

She looks at me for a bit, and I can't tell what she's thinking, but then she starts to say with firm resolve, "You're absolutely right. You know, I think—" she begins, and I will her to say *that I'm going to break up with Matt* or, at the very least, *that we have a lot of things to talk about before things get any more serious*, but she breaks off as she is distracted by the banging of the restaurant door.

Matt rushes into the restaurant. He looks frantic. Megan shoves her rye and Coke over to my side of the table. Matt sees us and hurries over. Relief is written across his face. "I was so worried," he says. "I couldn't find you at home, but then I thought you might be here, and I saw Vanessa's car—"

"But you're supposed to be at Bible study tonight. You're missing Bible study," Megan says.

"Well, I had to see you, after the way we left things on the phone. You misunderstood me."

"Oh." Megan smiles, and she melts. "You must have sped."

"Just this once," he says, smiling.

Megan has been swept away by this romantic gesture. I don't blame her. Don't we all want someone who is willing to drop everything and drive all night when we need them? I can't pretend I don't. Matt pulls up a chair. I pull on my jacket.

"No, stay," Matt says. "I didn't mean to interrupt your girls' night out."

Girls' night out? I roll my eyes.

"We could all go to the movie together," Megan suggests.

I attempt a smile, unsuccessfully. Why is she pretending everything is okay? "I'd better go. I think you two need to talk." I look pointedly at Megan. "Will you be okay?"

"Yeah." She nods. She looks at Matt.

He says, "Don't worry, I'll take good care of her. Thanks for watching out for her in the meantime." Like she's a pet. He covers her hand with his.

She nods again. Now I feel like I'm the one who is going to cry. I throw a twenty on the table, and I walk away.

~

April

Lindsay and Roxy and I go to see John Cusack in *Serendipity* at a cheap theatre in Edmonton. The plot is simple: Fate brings a man and a woman together. It's love at first sight. Life drags them apart. Several years later, they struggle to find each other again. When they finally do, there is a magical kiss. The credits roll. They will live happily ever after. I think about Zack Knight throughout the entire movie. By the time I leave the theatre, I decide that for once I am going to take control. I am not going to wait for life to happen to me, for fate to intervene. I am going to go to London. I am going to see Zack.

If I'm going to take a week off in May for my writing course in Edmonton anyway, I might as well ask for another week off and make a holiday of it. I need some time away from this town. I need to think and refocus. Zack keeps saying, "Any time you're in London." Well, I don't know who just happens to be in London—London, Ontario, that is—but it sounds like as good a place as any to spend a week. At least it's not Camrose. I certainly won't run into Evan there.

I e-mail Zack. I play it cool. I don't tell him that I'm coming just to see him. I tell him that I'm going to be in London for a week, visiting my "good" friend (actually, he's much more Megan's friend than mine) Graham, and I'm wondering if he might want to go for a coffee if he has the time. He e-mails back, and says that he'll be around, working at the radio station, but if I have any free time from visiting Graham, he'd love to take the opportunity to catch up. He asks me if I've been to Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls!

Honeymoon Heaven! How romantic!

I e-mail Graham. I tell him the whole story. I apologize for using him for such a subversive mission, and I tell him that he is most welcome to refuse me. But he doesn't. He says he'd be glad to have company, and if things don't work out with Zack, he'll even be happy to show me around southwestern Ontario.

I tell my boss that the writing course will make me a better writer on the job and that I'm long overdue for a holiday. Surprisingly, he lets me book off the first two weeks of May without any hassle. I confirm my plans with Graham and Zack. Graham will even pick me up from the airport in Hamilton. So it's set. The first week of May, I'll be in the writing course in Edmonton, the second, I'll be in London. Now, I just have to wait. And worry. About the writing course. About meeting Zack.

To say I'm nervous about the writing course is an understatement. I imagine that it will be full of already-published writers who will only be too eager to critique my fragile first attempts. I imagine the instructor pulling me aside and suggesting that perhaps the course isn't appropriate for me. *Just because you write little newspaper articles doesn't mean you're a creative writer,* she'll say with a condescending sneer. I imagine reading my work aloud and having everyone laugh. What have I let Megan talk me into?

~

In Grade 9, Mr. Nielsen gave us an assignment as part of a social studies unit on culture. We were to write an essay titled "My Utopia." I created a world in which I would live alone, in a tiny hut I would build myself in a stand of willows at the edge of a slough on the northwest section of our land. No one would know where I lived—well, except for either Michael Jackson or Boy George (I couldn't choose), who would come and visit me on demand. The shelves of my hut would be lined with my favourite books: the entire sets of the Trixie Belden, Nancy Drew, and the Hardy Boys series; all of the *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little House on the Prairie* books; as well as *Lost in the Barrens*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *The Hand of Robin Squires*, *The Cay*, *Summer of my German Soldier*, *The Outsiders*, *Dicey's Song*, and *Homecoming*. I would build a clay oven like Sam Gribley did in *My Side of the Mountain*. I would grow my own garden. I would raise animals in corrals I built of willow branches. Perhaps I would even tame a falcon.

I wrote and re-wrote that damn essay, determined to make it the best piece of writing I had ever produced. It might not be marketable, I knew, but every word was from the heart, and I knew my dad would be proud of this one. I would show him that I really was a great writer.

When Mr. Nielsen returned the essays, I was shocked. I barely passed. It was the lowest mark I had ever received on a writing assignment. *The writing is excellent,* he scrawled in red pen, *but your idea of a utopia is completely unrealistic!* I was humiliated. I decided two things: first, that I would hate Mr. Nielsen for the rest of my life; and second, that being a writer was not all it was cracked up to be.

~

After the demise of "date nights," my husband became a stranger. I rarely saw him, and although I knew he must have some sort of life that didn't involve me, I didn't know what it was. One night when he was out, I was checking my e-mail, and a little neon pink daisy icon began flashing on the monitor. I clicked on it and his ICQ account opened. There was her name, glowing on the screen. Brandi. I opened the file of their past chats and read conversations about her breast size and sex fantasies and plans for weekend getaways. One by one, puzzle pieces started snapping into place in my mind. All the strange behaviours became clues and everything finally made sense. Finally, I could explain it.

I waited for hours for Evan to come home, but in the wee hours of the morning, I gave up and went to bed. I was so exhausted. For months, I had been so tired, sleeping more than ten hours a night, always groggy and foggy-headed. So I crawled into bed, thinking I'd just nap until he got home, just to clear my mind. It was still so unreal that I didn't even cry. It was like a dream.

I woke to little butterfly kisses on my cheeks. His arms were wrapped around me, and the bed was warm in the morning sun. I snuggled into him, moulding my body into his. He smiled as I struggled to fully wake up. "We need to go on a date," he whispered. "Let's go to Edmonton tonight for sushi."

I nodded, smiling at him sleepily. I lifted a hand to touch his face. He was like a little boy, so excited by his own great idea. My head was foggy and aching; I felt like I was forgetting something. It was the last moment I ever loved him purely, the last time that my love for him wasn't accompanied by anger and pain and shame. Then the fog lifted, and my body went hard and cold. "No," I said. "We have to talk."

"It is true?" I asked.

"Is what true?"

"About your girlfriend?"

"What girlfriend?"

I didn't answer. He was silent. I waited, and in his silence I found the answer. Then he said it: "It's true."

I forgot how to think and breathe. It felt like my lungs and my brain had been physically ripped from my body. I rolled out of bed and stumbled down the stairs, hanging on to the banister as though it might save me. In the cool dark living room on the west side of the house, I fell into a chair. My mind seemed incapable of processing all the information contained in those two words: *It's true.* But my body knew. Tears popped out of my eyes violently. Drop. Drop. Drop. They fell quickly. Rhythmically. So silently they frightened me. Completely of their own volition and apart from the rest of me.

It's true. Those two words wiped out my life. They erased our ten years together. Ten years. It may not seem like a long time, perhaps, but it's not a short time, either. A third of my life. Those two little words erased all our plans and the end of the story that I grew up believing in. *And Cinderella and the handsome prince lived happily ever after.* The words erased our two little babies, Rayne and Marissa (we had already painted the spare room-someday-nursery Benjamin Moore #HC-049—Buxton Blue). Dead. Just like that. The words erased our five-year anniversary trip to South America. The Alaskan cruise we would treat our parents to as repayment for wedding expenses. Our dream of retiring on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast (I'd make pottery for the craft co-op in Gibsons; he'd open an organic café in Sechelt). Two little words and everything evaporated.

Evan came down the stairs. He stood in front of the chair. "Say something," he demanded. I looked at him blankly. Plop. Plop. Plop. The tears dripped off my jaw, and I didn't wipe them away. He shifted uncomfortably. "Don't you want to say something?"

The question seemed absurd. What should one say in a situation like that? There was everything to say and nothing to say. This was not a plot development that I was prepared for. There were no rehearsals for this scene. The magazines teach us how to catch a boyfriend, how to please him in bed, how to throw a great wedding. They don't tell us about this. What could I possibly say to someone who had wiped out my life with two tiny words? I grasped for something—anything—to say as the tears fell and fell.

Finally I said, "I think you should leave now," like an actress reading a script, because that's what they always said in the movies. He was relieved. He grabbed his coat. And as soon as he left, I realized that I wanted him to stay. I wanted him to insist on staying. I wanted him to beg to stay. I wanted him to comfort me. I wanted him to apologize. I wanted him to fight for us. But I told him to leave, and he did. For once, he did what I asked of him, because it let him off the hook.

~

Later he told me that if I had done anything else, if I had screamed or slapped him, he would have stayed. He said that doing those things would have proved that I loved him. But instead, I did nothing. It was my silence he couldn't bear. So he left.

~

Strange, how it didn't really surprise me that he had cheated on me, but it did surprise me that he left. We had been Evan & Vanessa since we were nineteen. I couldn't imagine anything different.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had pretended I didn't know. What if we had gone to Edmonton for sushi that night, and I hadn't said a word? I wonder if I had kept *acting* normal long enough, whether everything would have *become* normal eventually. Probably not. But it's a little fantasy I have.

~

I remember once when I was little—four, maybe, or five—I was helping my mom water the flower garden. She had a regular-sized watering can, and I had a tiny kid-sized one of my own. Kent was too young to be much help, so he just toddled around on the lawn.

A wasp flew into my watering can and splashed into the water. It swam around, flailing his legs in vain. I remember calling to my mother, "What should I do?"

"Never mind," she told me. "It's just a wasp." She went off to stop my brother from pulling up a delphinium.

But I couldn't let him drown. I picked up a twig and stuck it in the water, chasing the wasp around until he grabbed hold and pulled himself out. I carefully laid the twig on the grass and lay down to watch. The wasp was plastered against the stick, but his legs were working frantically, running along his body, and finally he managed to unstick one wing and then the other. He crawled off the wet twig onto a dry blade of grass, climbing up as high as he could. He flapped his wings in the air so rapidly that they became invisible. I leaned my face in close to try to see them, but I could only hear them whirr. I felt immense satisfaction—this tiny creature was alive because of me. I was responsible for saving his life. Maybe he would be my pet. The wasp finally lifted off his perch, and flew in a small, heavy circle towards me. I backed away, but not quickly enough. Pain shot in my eye, and I was screaming before I even realized what had happened. My mother came running.

The ice she put on my eyelid didn't stop it from swelling shut. Even once the pain had diminished, I was still sniffling. My feelings hurt more than my eye did. I couldn't believe that the wasp had stung me after I had saved his life.

"Why, Mommy?" I whined.

"It's a wasp, honey," she said, shrugging. "It's just what he's like. He can't help himself."

~

"So," Megan asks, "What are you planning to do after May?"

"Um." I'm not sure what she means. "Just going back to work, I guess."

"You'll still be staying here?" she asks.

I haven't thought about this. But things have been quite strained since the night Matt flew in from Edmonton and swooped into Boston Pizza. I feel guilty about the things I said to her, afraid that I revealed how strongly I thought she should break up with Matt. Now that they are back to being all lovey-dovey, it seems that I made a mistake in letting myself get caught up in it. Perhaps she is angry with me for my eagerness to support her anger against Matt. Perhaps, though, she is just embarrassed that she let things get back to normal so easily. I don't know. We don't talk about it. It's too hard.

I realize that this is as close as Megan will ever come to asking me to move out. She is so kind and generous that she would never ask me to leave, no matter how much she might want to. I'm not sure that this is what she's saying now, but I can't take the chance of losing our friendship over a roommate arrangement. Our relationship is precarious as it is at the moment, and I can't bear the thought of straining it beyond repair.

"I was thinking it's probably time for me to start looking for a place of my own," I say tentatively. "Time to get back into the real world and deal with things on my own."

Is it my imagination, or does she receive my news with relief? "Whatever is best for you," she says. "You're welcome to be here as long as you need."

The truth is I don't need it anymore. At first, when Evan and I sold the house, it seemed too unbearable to be alone. I couldn't cope with (what seemed at the time) the enormity of finding a place, setting up utility accounts, and arranging furniture. But now, I can.

We leave it at that. She tells me to take as much time as I need to find another place. Afterwards, I think about it some more. This time at her place has seemed like a transition, like I was waiting or filling in time before I moved on to the next phase of my life. I try to imagine myself leasing an apartment in Camrose, setting up all my furniture, and settling in for a few more years here. Living so near Evan and Brandi. Running into them at a lounge or at the mall. Eating at all the restaurants that I've been to with him, that he's been to with her. Trying to re-build a community of acquaintances in a town where everyone knows who I am and how I was dumped.

I can't think of anything more unpleasant.

~

On the Thursday night before my holiday begins, I am busy packing—both for my writing course in Edmonton and for my week in London. I also pack up a few books and clothes I don't need, so I can store them at Kent's place in Edmonton. That will make it easier when I move out of Megan's house. I remember that I have to call Evan about some mail. I look in the phone book for his new number (he and Brandi have moved again) and dial. Brandi answers, and my heart thumps, but I say in as grown-up a voice as I can muster, "Hello. May I speak to Evan, please?"

"Just a sec."

I hear a muffle of voices, and then Evan is on the phone. "Hey," he says, when he recognizes my voice. "What's up?"

I hear Brandi in the background. "Who is it?"

"The new owners dropped off some stray mail that came to our old place a few weeks ago. One letter is addressed to you."

Again, I hear Brandi. "Is it her?"

In a muffled voice (he must have his hand over the receiver), he says, "Will you shut up?"

I get some satisfaction in a) knowing that they're not picture-perfectly happy, and b) getting under her skin, especially now that I don't care that she's got Evan.

"Okay, thanks," he says, trying to sound composed. "If you leave it in Megan's mailbox, I'll pick it up tomorrow."

Again, I hear Brandi: "I warned her!"

"All right, then, I'll leave it in the mailbox." I pause. I say smugly, "I guess you'd better go."

We hang up. I finish packing the boxes and double-checking the contents of my backpack while I listen to *Law & Order.* It takes me three trips to carry everything out to the car, but if I get everything out there tonight, I can leave immediately after work tomorrow. I look at the clock when I'm finished. Not quite eleven, and I'm already exhausted.

~

The next morning, I am awakened by someone pounding on the front door at six o'clock. Megan and I both reach the door at the same time. My heart is racing; I am afraid it is the RCMP here to inform us that something horrible has happened to one of our family members. Megan opens the door, and a woman in hospital scrubs is standing on the step. She looks us up and down and I realize that we are both wearing short, skimpy nighties. I shiver from the chill. She nods at Megan; obviously they recognize each other from the hospital. "I live one house down across the alley," she says. "I was just on my way to work when I realized someone tore up the alley last night. I'm afraid one of you girls has had your windshield smashed in."

"Oh, my God," says Megan.

"I've already called the police," says the woman. "I better get back out there and wait for them. If one of you can get dressed and come out, I'll head to work." She leaves, and we shut the door.

"Fuck," I say, as we race for the back porch. I don't need to go outside to know whose windshield has been smashed.

~

The good thing about living in a small town is that when you phone the police, they come. When I make the call, the dispatcher tells me that she's already talked to our neighbour and a car is on its way. I change into some track pants and a fleece jacket and go outside to wait. I hear Canada Geese honking, and I look up to find their V in the morning sky. It must be spring.

The woman from across the alley ambles over. "Isn't it something?" she says. "At first I thought it was you gals having a tiff, but now I see that they've turned over a couple of garbage cans on either side of you."

"What?" I ask sharply.

"Well," she shrugs. "You know, last night I saw you putting those boxes and bags into your car, and then this morning your windshield was bashed in, so my first thought was that you two were having a bit of a spat." She gives me what I think is supposed to be an understanding look.

I just stare at her. Is she saying what I think she's saying? That because we are over nineteen and we live in the same house, we must be lesbians? That we're the kind of people that smash in each other's windows? I know I should just laugh it off. I mean, so what if we were lesbians? But I am so sick of the assumptions people here make. If I'm single at thirty, there must be something "different" about me, there must be some explanation. Because it's certainly abnormal to be single at this age. According to them.

She backtracks quickly. "But now I can see that that's not the case. I mean, they've turned over the garbage can at my place. But your car was the only one that was hit. You're the only one with any damage. Pretty unlucky, I guess."

"Yeah. Pretty unlucky."

A police cruiser crawls down the alley and stops in front of us. My neighbour disappears. Two RCMP officers get out and survey the scene. One of them comes over to me, flipping out a notepad, ready to take a statement. The other puts on gloves and pulls the garbage can out of my windshield. He puts it in the trunk of their car. "For fingerprints," he explains.

The officer can't believe I didn't hear anything, especially when I point to my bedroom window, which faces the alley. "Well," he said, "To be honest, there's not much hope of finding whoever did it. I mean, it was college night at Cadillacs, and your alley is right on the path from there to the freshman dorms. Could have been anyone."

I don't say anything.

He looks at me sharply. "Unless you know someone who might have done it for a certain reason? Can you think of any one?

I think. Suddenly I feel very tired. Tired of this town. Tired of being judged. Tired of people thinking they know something they don't. Tired of all the soap opera drama that has been my life for the past three years. I just want some peace.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I can't think of anyone."

After the police officers drive away, I am left alone in the quiet early morning. I hear the cry of geese far above me in the sky. I go down on my hands and knees, trying to pick the biggest shards of glass from the grass.

~

May

My weeklong writing course turns out to be both exhausting and exhilarating. Each day in class, we write and write and write. My hand is cramped, and I am getting a callous on my right middle finger that I haven't had since high school and the emergence of word processors. In my personal essay course, I write a series of essays about growing up in Tulliby Lake. In my journal writing class, I write visualizations for the future and lists of things I want to achieve. But it is in my life writing course that something inside me changes. The teacher, a flamboyant writer named Zoë, reads us bits of poems or essays, sometimes just a line, and encourages us to dig deep for an authentic response to the prompt. I end up writing about Evan. A lot. I write about him, write to him, write through him. And I learn about the tremendous relief that comes from sorting things out on paper. Although I've been doing lots of writing in my diary at home, this is different because I am prompted to write about different things and from different perspectives than I have ever written before. I feel a sense of taking control of him, of us, and of myself. I realize that even if I don't write well, even if I am not destined to be the next Margaret Atwood, I can write for me.

I do go deep. I write out the most private, painful things, and I guard them in my purple, spiral-bound Hilroy notebook, and I keep my head down when Zoë asks for volunteers to read aloud. I know I'm not nearly as good a writer as most of the other women in the class, but that gradually ceases to matter. Zoë tells us over and over, "If you write, you're a writer," and I begin to believe it. During this week, being published seems the most irrelevant thing in the world. But the writing I'm doing is absolutely relevant to me. Before this week began, "being divorced" seemed to make up about seventy-five percent of my identity. As I write about the divorce, though, the percentage keeps dropping, and by the end of the week, it's a smaller part of me. Maybe it also has something to do with being away from Camrose, but whatever it is, it feels good. On the last day of class, Zoë tells us, "There are a couple of you who haven't read yet. You don't think I've been keeping track? I know who you are." I bury my head. She calls on two other women, and they reluctantly read poems in whispery voices.

"And Vanessa?" she asks. "You're the last one."

I know there is no arguing with her. I make my way to the chair at the front of the class.

"I'm not really a writer—" I start to say.

"Nonsense!" Zoë interrupts. "You're writing, aren't you? Never apologize for your writing. It is what it is."

I take a deep breath. I begin to read a poem I wrote about Evan and about the fear of being alone. It's not a great poem. I know that. But I look up at the circle of women around me, and they are all gazing at me intently while I read. They are paying attention. A couple of women nod when I read a line about having the power to evict fear from my life, and I know that at some point in their lives, they too have been afraid, afraid of their *own* things, and that they can understand what it feels like to have to tackle fear head-on. Zoë is nodding, too, and I am amazed that my poem—my not-very-good-poem—can connect with her, but it does. My heart is beating madly, and I feel a lump in my throat. As I read the last few lines, tears slip silently down my cheeks. Where do they come from? It's as though a valve has released and some long-pent-up pressure is starting to seep out. Zoë sees my tears and misunderstands. She nods sympathetically. "Where there are tears, there's story," she says. "The story's not finished until the tears have all been shed." But these are not unhappy tears.

I return to my seat. "Now," Zoë asks me. "That wasn't so bad, was it? How did it feel?"

"It felt awesome," I say.

~

I remember when I was a kid I used to wonder whether a person could run out of tears. But in the days after Evan left, I learned that there is an endless supply. I spent every evening staring out the window, waiting for him to come home. If I stared hard enough, I could actually see—not imagine, but *see*!—him coming through the gate and up the steps. Once or twice I even rose and put my hand on the door knob before I realized it was just a mirage. I didn't tell anyone he had gone. I was too ashamed, and I still didn't believe it was true. I convinced myself that he would come back for our second wedding anniversary, which was only two weeks after he moved out of the house. We had already bought tickets to *Miss Saigon* at the Jubilee in Edmonton. But there was no word from him.

The morning of the play, I called his cell phone. Brandi answered. It caught me off guard. "Uh," I stammered. "Is Evan there?"

"He's in the shower," she said.

"Can you give him a message?"

"No," she snapped. "Quit fucking calling him!" And she hung up.

I called Kent. I told him everything. He drove out from Edmonton that night. He stayed with me for a week, commuting to work an hour and a half each way. In the evenings, he washed dishes and did laundry. He called my boss and arranged for an indefinite period of sick leave. Sometimes we watched TV in silence together. Sometimes we talked a little. Whatever we did, those stealthy tears kept falling plop, plop, plop and we learned to ignore them and talk through them because they just wouldn't stop.

I finally ventured out of my house to go to the grocery store. There were lots of cars in the parking lot and people in Extra Foods, and it stunned me that life outside was going on as usual, while my life had stopped completely. In the cereal aisle, I reached for Cheerios because they were Evan's favourite and they were on sale, and the tears started falling right onto the floor of the store. The clerk at the till told me to have a nice day, and the impossibility of that happening to me ever again seemed too much to bear, and I wanted to hurt her for having the nerve to say it.

~

In the weeks after my husband left me for another woman, a typical day looked roughly like this:

10:00 a.m. wake up
10: 45 a.m. get out of bed
11:00 a.m. watch *Days of Our Lives* (try to make myself eat something during commercials)
12:00 a.m. watch *Judge Judy* – two back-to-back episodes
1:00 p.m. shower while listening to *Days of Our Lives* playing again
2:00 p.m. watch *North of 60*
3:00 p.m. watch *Degrassi High* re-runs (two back-to-back episodes)
4:00 p.m. watch *Seinfeld* re-run
4:30 p.m. watch *Family Feud*
5:00 p.m. watch *Oprah* (try to make myself eat something during commercials)
6:00 p.m. watch *The Wonder Years* re-run
6:30 p.m. watch *The Cosby Show* re-run
7:00 p.m. watch *Friends* re-run
7:30 p.m. watch *Frasier* re-run
8:00 p.m. watch *Judging Amy, Seventh Heaven, That's Life,* etc.
9:00 p.m. phone Megan to tell her about my day
10:00 p.m. watch *Law & Order, NYPD Blue, The Practice,* etc.
11:00 p.m. go to bed
12:00 a.m. fall asleep
Repeat

I couldn't cope with going to work, and my boss at the *Gazette* told me to take as long as I needed to get over it. It seemed I would need a long, long time.

~

In the anger stage, the absurdity of small things infuriated me. Toast popping out of the toaster. The same toaster Evan had used every morning. As though nothing had changed. The familiar smell of my conditioner in the shower. The same conditioner I used when Evan lived with me. It seemed impossible that all the little things in life could remain constant, when all the big things had changed. I lay on the floor of the living room in the dark and stared at the ceiling and listened to blaring Alanis Morissette on the stereo that Evan had picked out for us at Sounds Alive, and I sang at the top of my lungs:

You seem very well, things look peaceful
I'm not quite as well, I thought you should know
Did you forget about me, Mr. Duplicity?
I hate to bug you in the middle of dinner
It was a slap on the face how quickly I was replaced
Are you thinking of me when you fuck her?

And every time you speak her name
Does she know how you told me you'd hold me
Until you died? 'til you died!
But you're still alive!

And I'm here to remind you
Of the mess you left when you went away
It's not fair to deny me
Of the cross I bear that you gave to me
You! You! You oughta know!

I fantasized about revenge:

Plan 1: I call Crimestoppers and tell them that Brandi is growing marijuana in her apartment. The police find drugs in her house. She goes to jail. For a long time.

Plan 2: I call Brandi's boss at the Feedmill and tell him that Brandi stole from me. She gets fired. She can't get another job in town, so she moves away. For a long time.

Plan 3: I get some girl with a husky voice to call Brandi's place asking for Evan. She thinks he's cheating on her. She throws him out and never lets him back in the house.

Plan 4: I get someone to call Evan with a friendly warning that Brandi is cheating on him. He throws her out and never lets her back in the house.

Plan 5: I hire a thug to "accidentally" kill Brandi in a hit-and-run accident. He is a professional, and the crime is never traced to me. It is well worth the five thousand dollars.

Plan 6: Brandi goes into anaphylactic shock when her bargain-brand breast implants explode and the toxins leak out. Nothing can be done to save her.

~

In the sadness stage, I listened to Paula Cole over and over again:

Where is my John Wayne?
Where is my prairie sun?
Where is my happy ending?
Where have all the cowboys gone?

Maybe if I sing loud enough, I thought, if I crank the stereo high enough, someone—Megan, or Kent, or a stranger across the street—will hear. Maybe, even, Evan will hear. Someone will rush in the front door, take me in their arms, and rescue me from this unbearable pain and loneliness.

~

The insanity of what I'm doing hits me about thirty minutes after my West Jet flight takes off from the airport in Edmonton. It has been five years since I've seen Zack. I don't even remember what he looks like. What am I doing? To squash my rising panic, I flip through my *Let's Go: Ontario* tourist guidebook and jot down notes in my journal:

Place:	London, Ontario
Absolute Location:	43° 02' N 81° 09' W
Relative Location:	3109 km southeast of Camrose
Elevation:	278 metres
Region:	Mixed Wood Plain
Average Temp.:	December -6°C; July +21°C
Annual Prec.:	987 mm
Population:	336, 539
Area:	421 km^2
Pop. Density:	798/km^2

On my second day in London, he picks me up in front of Graham's apartment building. *I'll be the blonde girl standing by the front door,* I told him. *I'll be driving a black Sunfire,* he replied. I go down early and wait. I put on my sunglasses, then take them off again to check my reflection in the window. Finally a black Sunfire pulls up the driveway. I put my sunglasses back on, like protection. The car pulls up next to me, and the passenger window rolls down. I look in, and there is Zack leaning over, peering out at me. "Vanessa, I presume?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. I pull open the door, take a deep breath, and hop into a car with a practical stranger. I take off my glasses and look at him while he drives, while we make small talk about the weather and the trip. "You look almost how I remembered," I tell him. And he does, more or less, only older, with wrinkles—laugh lines—in the tanned skin around his eyes and mouth.

"Really?" he asks, taking off his sunglasses and turning to me while he waits at a red light. "You don't look at all like I remember." I can't decide whether or not that's a compliment.

We go to Starbucks for coffee, and we don't run out of things to talk about. After all, there's five years of news to catch up on, and all the things we didn't know about each other in the first place. We go for a drink after he gets off work the next night. My nervousness wears off, and I'm comfortable with him.

On Saturday morning, we drive to Niagara Falls. How perfectly romantic! It's about an hour and a half drive, so we have lots of time to talk. It's my last full day in London. We seem to dive right into the heavy stuff. My marriage to Evan. His relationship with Karen. We talk about what we want out of life: marriage, kids, jobs. He is the first person I tell aloud: *I want to be a writer*. Because he is still somewhat a stranger, it seems safe to tell him.

"A writer?" he says. "That's really cool." I am pleased. I feel like we have a special bond now, because he knows this secret of mine.

I am surprised to find out that men have biological clocks, too. He's thirty-one and ready for marriage and kids. His life has not turned out how he expected it to. He says he wants a good job so he can support a family. He says it may sound naïve, but he still believes in love "for ever and ever amen."

Niagara Falls is—well, crowded, more than anything. We both hate the crowds, so we squeeze between the wall of tourists at the railing for a few quick mandatory photos, and then we head back to the car. We drive across the border into New York State just so we can keep talking.

I try to explain things—my marriage and my divorce—the best I can, as well as I understand it. I describe the over-responsible/under-responsible pattern I learned about from Marge. I describe the myths I learned about from Dr. Phil on *Oprah*. It seems like a lot to lay on someone I barely know, but he keeps asking, and I remind myself that in a few days he is going to be two thousand miles away again. I don't want a second round of regrets. So I spill it all. We don't have the luxury of playing coy games.

I realize that he's still really fond of Karen, and he's really confused. They broke up only because he moved to London, and he wonders whether that was a good enough reason. I realize that even if he were interested in me—and he hasn't given me any indication that he is—he is a long way off from being ready for a relationship with someone new.

It's late by the time we cross back over the border and head north. We are both quiet in the car. I feel like something has happened, but I'm not sure what. I feel like he is disappointed, too, but I'm not sure that it's in the same way.

The next morning, we meet for breakfast before Graham drives me to Hamilton to catch my plane. Something has changed, and we are suddenly close and comfortable like old friends. And I am so happy that I came and met him again, even though it has popped my fantasies. I have done something brave and independent, and I am proud of myself. And I am grateful to him, because he, or the image of him anyway, kept me sane during the past couple of years when it seemed impossible for me to love anyone again or for anyone to love me. He has been a gift in my life twice now. But I'm ready to let go of the dream, and let him join the real world of my life. He tells me he'll try to come to Alberta in July. We hug each other good-bye and say we'll see each other sooner this time, and I know we will, because life has a funny way of bringing people into my life when I need them.

~

It's not until after I've boarded the plane in Hamilton, and we are flying over the Great Lakes, that I really start to think about the conversation Zack and I had in the car on the way back from Niagara Falls late Saturday night. We were talking about our jobs and our goals. Zack said that he thought there were four main needs to consider when deciding where to work and live:

1) Working at an enjoyable, challenging job
2) Having a peaceful lifestyle and pleasant living environment
3) Maintaining good relationships with friends and family
4) Earning enough money

He said he justifies being far from friends and family because his job is so good. Although he misses the lifestyle of the East Coast, his job in London is rewarding and he makes great money. So he is willing, for now, to sacrifice the relationships and the environment. However, within a few years, those things will become more important than the high-paying job, and he will probably move back home.

I think about my job at the *Gazette*. It certainly doesn't pay well. I make less than $30 000 per year, while most of my friends make between $40 000 and $50 000. This wouldn't matter if my job was highly rewarding, but it's not. Most of the time I'm bored, and I'm often frustrated because my boss underestimates my abilities. My relationships are not flourishing in Camrose. My family is far away. I have no prospects for a love life. And now that Megan is so occupied with Matt, I don't even have a strong network of friends. As for my living environment, what can I say? I live in someone else's tiny spare bedroom. I live in a town where I dread even going grocery shopping because I might run into my ex-husband and his girlfriend.

I wouldn't mind making no money if I was working for a worthy cause—a CIDA project in Cambodia, for example—or if I was living in a beautiful comfortable place—say, Tuscany or southern France. On the other hand, I could put up with an unpleasant job and an unpleasant environment if I were making a ton of money that would help me meet my goals in the long term. The fact is, though, that in my current situation in Camrose, I am not meeting *any* of the four needs Zack described. I am just putting in time, waiting for something to happen, for the magic spell to kick in. But, as John Lennon said, *Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.*

I think about what I am missing most. I don't mind not having lots of money right now. But I do mind having a mindless job, no friends, and not liking the town I live in. The most enjoyable thing I have done in the past year is my graduate class at the university. It has often been in the back of my mind that I would enjoy going to school full-time again.

I mull these things over as the plane carries me across the prairies. I jot notes in my journal. By the time the plane starts its descent into Edmonton, I have decided that I am going to quit my job, move to Edmonton, and go back to school.

~

Back in Alberta, my brother picks me up from the airport and drives me to his house in Edmonton. I immediately call my boss, and he doesn't even make me give two weeks notice. As he so kindly points out, any fool can write a food column for a week or two. It is odd to suddenly be jobless, but freeing, too. Kent supports my decision to go back to school. He says I can live with him as long as I want. He gives me full run of the basement. I think he's just relieved to see me leaving Camrose.

Place: Edmonton, Alberta

Absolute Location: 53° 34′ N 113° 31′ W
Relative Location: 97 km NW of Camrose
Elevation: 671 metres
Region: Parkland
Average Temp.: December -12°C; July +18°C
Annual Prec.: 477 mm
Population: 666, 104
Area: 684 km^2
Pop. Density: 974/km^2

After not checking e-mail for two weeks due to the writing course and the trip to London, I log on to my Hotmail account. There's a message from Megan labeled "News." I eagerly double-click on it, expecting an update of how her summer is going. It says:

From: megan52@yahoo.ca
To: vanessals@hotmail.com

Hi Everyone,

You'll never believe what happened! Matt asked me to marry him! I'm so so so excited!

Megan

I scroll to the top of the message. It's over a week old. I immediately start to cry. I don't mean the odd pretty tear slipping delicately down my cheeks; I mean full-body heaving sobs. I don't respond because I have no idea what to say. I log off and call Claire at work. She answers on the second ring.

"What's wrong?" she asks immediately.

"Megan's engaged!" I blurt.

There is a long pause. "So I take it these are not tears of joy?"

"I don't know. No. Am I a horrible person?"

"You're just in shock. It'll wear off," she says.

"I don't know."

"What was the proposal like? I bet Matt was super romantic!"

What was the proposal like? Who cares? "She didn't say," I say. "All it said was that Matt asked her to marry him, and that she was excited."

Claire laughs. "So is she excited because she's getting married, or just excited because he asked? She didn't even say whether she said yes or no?"

"No, she didn't say. But of course she said yes."

"That's funny."

"It's not funny. It's like all she cares about is that she got him to ask. It's like it doesn't even matter what she thinks or if she wants to or not. Like it's all up to him. Does she even *want* to get married to him? Or is it just some kind of game to get him to propose? It's like she wants a *husband* so much that she's not even thinking about who that husband actually *is*. Like she's more excited that *someone* asked her to marry him, than that she's going to be married to *him*. Like—"

Claire gets impatient with my rant and interrupts. "Are you just maybe a little jealous that she's found a guy and you haven't?" she asks gently.

"I am *not* jealous," I say. "I'm just scared for her. She'll have to live with this decision for the rest of her life, and she's not even making a decision at all."

"You're being dramatic," she says. "She's just getting married."

"I know what it's like. I've been there, remember? So have you, for that matter."

"I'm sure it'll be different for Megan than it was for us. Matt's such a nice guy."

There's a long pause.

"Look," she says. "She's your best friend, and she's getting married. Just be happy for her."

She's right. How can I begrudge Megan this? It's every girl's dream. It would be so cruel of me to spoil it for her. I *am* jealous, but it's not that I want what she has. It's that I miss the time I used to spend with her. I would be a terrible person if that jealousy were enough to make me resent her getting married. But it feels like it's more than that. It's not that I don't want her to get married. I do. I am just afraid of *who* she is marrying and *why*. I go through a list of other guys I wish she were with, mutual friends who *get* how smart and spiritual and creative and beautiful Megan is. Like Graham. If she were marrying him, I'd be jumping for joy. Wouldn't I?

And I am envious, after all. *I* want to find someone to be with for the rest of my life. Someone to talk with about my day, someone to kiss good morning, someone to cuddle with in the night, someone to bring me tea when I have a cold. Is that unreasonable?

"I wonder what the ring's like?" Claire wonders, interrupting my thoughts. "I bet it's big."

I make excuses and hang up.

~

I dread calling Megan because I don't know what to say. But I finally force myself to do it late that evening. Luckily, she's not home so I leave a message, something about how I just got her e-mail, and we need to get together. She calls back a couple of nights later. We talk for a few minutes, and it's stilted. Finally she says, "I'm sorry I'm so distracted. It's just that we're already making plans and my head is spinning, and I can't think straight."

"Why don't I come down to Camrose this weekend? We can talk, and maybe I can help you with some of this."

"Matt and I have this thing with his parents this weekend and then a pre-marital course the next. What about the weekend after that?"

"That would be perfect," I say, although I had hoped to see her much sooner. I start to debate about whether I should tell her how I feel.

~

A new medical study is published and suddenly articles about fertility are splashed across the covers of *Time* and *Macleans*, and even Oprah does a show about women who waited too long, who put their careers first, who tried to have babies at forty and found out it was too late. I don't even have the excuse of a thrilling, financially-rewarding career holding me back—just a serious lack of a male companion. I'd give up anything—any job, any money, any car—to have a child of my own.

~

June

Megan and I meet at BP Lounge. The waitress, Crystal, says, "Hey, I haven't seen you girls for a long time!"

"You're working here again?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. "The tips are just as good as at Cadillacs, and there's a little less excitement." She catches sight of Megan's ring and bends over it, taking Megan's hand in hers. She giggles. "Wow!" she says. "Aren't you a lucky girl?" She calls another waitress over: "Take a look at this rock!" Megan giggles self-consciously. I know I should join in, but at the moment, the ring seems to me to be the most trivial of matters, even though everyone else obviously thinks otherwise. It occurs to me that there is no socially acceptable response to an engagement announcement other than "Congratulations." It is taboo to say things such as *You must be joking!* or *Are you insane?* or *Have you thought about this for even a second?* or *Your husband is going to smother your soul slowly, bit by bit, until you can't even recognize yourself in the mirror!* Nope. It's much safer to stick with "Congratulations!" and a pasted-on smile. It's the only way to keep friends.

There is an awkward silence after the waitresses leave. We study our menus as though they were new. Crystal comes back. I order four-cheese fettuccine. Crystal laughs. "Thank God some things never change!"

After she leaves with our orders, I say to Megan, "So? Tell me everything."

"Well, the wedding is going to be at the end of July—" she trails off almost sheepishly, waiting for my reaction. At first I am relieved. I have a year to talk some sense into her, but the look on her face makes me realize I've misunderstood.

"July? Like, this year?" I say. She nods. "Wow! A month," I say, trying to keep a smile in place. "That's really soon."

"Oh, I know," she gushes. "But Matt wants to do it really soon, and I can't imagine my life without him, and he's already been doing so much planning."

"What happened, did he give you a one-date proposal?" I say, lightly (I hope). "Is it not valid if you want to think about it for a while?" I feel myself veering onto thin ice. Why can't I keep quiet?

"Well, no, not exactly," she says. "But when he proposed, he had this summer in mind."

"Oh," I say.

"So the church is already booked and so is the hotel for the reception. Matt and his mom have been great. They've made all the arrangements, and I haven't really had to do a thing."

"Oh," I say again, stupidly. There is a pause, and then I think of something and brighten. "What about a wedding dress? I'd love to go wedding dress shopping!"

"Actually, I went with Matt's mom. There was no one else to go with. Anyway, I found one on the rack that fit perfectly, so I just thought, why not get it over with?"

"That's great," I say. I feel strangely disoriented. Everything is happening so fast. "You went with Matt's mom?"

"Yeah. I think my mom is feeling kind of left out. She's not too happy. My parents are still in shock, but they live so far away, it just seems easier to get things done on my own instead of having them come up from Brooks." She takes a sip of her Diet Coke. "I do have one favour to ask you, though."

I cheer up, because even though I am so overwhelmed by all of this, I am excited because I'm going to be a bridesmaid. I've never been one before, but I've never had a friend as close as Megan. Since we made a pact a few years ago about being each other's bridesmaids, we've often imagined small intimate ceremonies on Caribbean islands, but a big bash in small-town Alberta will do.

Megan says, "Will you give the toast to the bride?"

"Of course," I say, waiting for the rest.

She reads my mind. "I'm only going to have one bridesmaid. My sister."

"Oh."

She rushes on. "Matt wanted to have two or three attendants each, but I told him I just couldn't cope with choosing more than one."

"Oh." I struggle to adjust my brain, and I force a smile. I'm not going to be her bridesmaid. "Well, it'll make things a lot simpler, right?"

She looks relieved. "Right."

"Well," I say. "It sounds like you have everything totally planned. I'm impressed."

Our food comes, and we eat in silence for a few minutes. My mind is reeling. I'm not going to be Megan's bridesmaid. But more importantly, two months ago, Megan wasn't sure if she should even be in a relationship with Matt. Two months ago, as far as she was concerned, they were far, far away from being ready to get married. Does a romantic proposal magically erase all that?

We make small talk over our meals. She tells me the latest gossip about politics at the hospital. We get Crystal to box up the leftovers. I lean back in my chair. I say, as evenly as I can, "Megan, are you sure this is what you want?"

She sighs. "I mean, sure, it's a little faster than I wanted, but if it's going to happen eventually anyway, I guess it makes no difference if it's sooner than later."

"I mean the whole thing. Are you sure about the whole thing?"

"Of course," she says, but her eyes are evasive, and she speaks as if by rote. "Matt is an amazing guy. I'm very lucky."

A voice in my head warns me not to push farther. It's too dangerous. I remember reading an article about women who tell their friends about a husband's affair. Even if it's true, the women always lose the friendship. The truth is too painful. Kill the bearer of bad news, because it's too humiliating to face them afterwards. If someone had told me it was a mistake to marry Evan, I would have ignored and hated them, even though they would have been right. I'm not so certain that I'm right about Megan and Matt. I just wish she would wait a little, mull it over a little. I tell myself to stop. She hasn't asked for my opinion, not even close. I can't risk losing her.

I say, "I'm glad things are working out the way you wanted them to." And I pause and force myself to say, carefully. "And your ring is just beautiful."

"Thank you," she says, and she smiles with relief.

~

I hit West Edmonton Mall to look for a dress for Megan's wedding. After about twenty stores with no success, I try Fairweather. I try on a dozen size seven dresses. All of them look awful on me. I am about to give up when the salesclerk suggests, "You know, I think the problem is that you need a smaller size." She brings me a size five. I put it on. It still doesn't fit. She says, "Let's try one size smaller."

I laugh. "I haven't fit into a size three since I was eleven years old!"

"Sizes are getting bigger," she says. "Just give it a try." She brings me a size three.

I humour her. The dress fits perfectly. I stare at myself in the mirror, and I am red-faced and shining-eyed. The clerk sees that I'm upset but misunderstands. "It's beautiful on you," she says uncertainly. "Really."

She doesn't understand that I'm upset because while my brain knows that I am wearing a size three dress, my eyes see a size twelve girl with bulging thighs and puffy cheeks. The fact that my brain can allow such a discrepancy between perception and reality frightens the hell out of me. I'm not crying about the dress. I'm crying about all the other things that might not be true.

I buy the dress. Over the next few days, I also buy a ton of clothes that the fatter me would have never worn: clingy tops, shiny pants, a fitted leather jacket. Perhaps if I have nice, well-fitting clothes, I will be less likely to gain any more weight again. Although I weigh 125 pounds now, and although my weight seems to have plateaued, I know that I am no more in control of it than when I was 160 pounds.

~

For nearly a year after Evan left, I could hardly eat. I was nauseous every morning. If I ate even a normal-sized meal, I'd throw it up. Finally, I started taking Gravol so I could keep food down long enough to digest it. The weight slipped off, quickly at first and then more slowly. Thirty-five pounds in twelve months. I went through three complete new wardrobes. I stopped buying pants with front pleats. And the whole time, everyone told me how great I looked and congratulated me on my weight loss. I tried to receive the compliments graciously, but inside, I was afraid I was dying.

One day I ran into Evan at Tim Horton's after we hadn't seen each other for a few months. He looked me up and down in a way he hadn't since we were first dating. "You look really great," he said. "You must be working out." I hated him for not understanding why I had lost the weight.

"I guess it's too late, though, isn't it?" I said curtly, walking away.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said.

~

I went to my doctor. She said that weight loss was a normal reaction to stress. She said that everything would even out once my emotional state was back to normal. I was too scared to ask her what would happen if my emotional state never did get back to normal. Would starvation or insanity kill me first?

~

When I went away to college, I gained the obligatory "freshman five." In my second year, I gained another five, and I started to worry about my weight. One night I was talking on the phone with my boyfriend, Sean. I was in my dorm room, supposedly studying for an exam the next day, but as always, I was easily distracted. "I'm craving an Eskimo Pie," I told him, even though I was still full from supper.

"No!" he said firmly. "You're not allowed." I had shared my weight worries with him, and he knew that I was dieting. I hadn't yet learned never to talk to men about weight or dieting—it always turns out badly.

"What do you mean I'm not allowed?" I asked him that night.

He laughed. "Hey, don't get mad! I'm just trying to help. Go ahead and eat the ice cream, my little butterball."

"I have to go," I said, fuming, and hung up the phone.

How dare he tell me what to do? How dare he criticize my body? I marched to the concession stand and bought an Eskimo Pie. I wolfed it down in about twenty seconds. *Not allowed!*

By the time I got back to my room, my stomach felt queasy. I really had been too full to eat any more. I tried to get back to my studying, but I was mad at Sean, and my stomach hurt. I tossed my books aside and lay back on my bed. I felt as if I was going to throw up.

It occurred to me that I probably would feel better and be able to study if I did throw up. My stomach heaved at the thought, and I got up and went to the washroom, just in case. I leaned against the cubicle wall, hovering near the toilet. It would feel so good to get that ice cream out of my stomach. I leaned over the toilet hopefully, willing myself to throw it all up. I opened my mouth, but nothing came. Tentatively, I put a finger in my mouth and brushed the back of my throat. The vomit came in a huge rush. After three heaves, my mangled Eskimo Pie and half my supper floated in the toilet. I flushed, washed my hands, and brushed my teeth. I was trembling and sweating. But after a few minutes, my stomach felt fine. I settled down to study. No harm done after all.

Sean called back later. "I'm sorry about before," he said. "I really was trying to help."

"Don't worry about it," I said pleasantly. "I didn't eat the ice cream after all."

~

A few nights later we were at Sean's parents' house for supper. Roast chicken and baked potatoes. They didn't serve food like that in the cafeteria. I ate a ton. After supper, Sean's mom proudly presented a black forest cake, which she knew was my favourite. I knew I shouldn't. "No thanks," I said when she offered me a piece.

"Really?" she asked.

"Vanessa is dieting," Sean whispered dramatically. His family all looked at me, and I felt myself blush.

"Don't be silly," his mom said. "You don't need to be dieting!"

"That's what I keep telling her," Sean said. It was *not* what he kept telling me. He always played with the little roll around my stomach and called me Miss Piggy when I ate something I shouldn't.

Sean dug into a huge piece of cake. It was so unfair. I bet he never felt guilty about what or how much he ate. The cake looked so good. There was real whipped cream and maraschino cherries on top. While Sean pigged out beside me, his family was watching me. My mouth was watering, but I didn't want to wreck my diet.

Then I remembered the Eskimo Pie.

"Oh, all right." I smiled at Sean's mom. "You twisted my rubber arm!"

"That's better," she said, dishing me a generous portion.

Her black forest cake was always excellent. I think she put Kahlua in it. I ate it with joy. After all, it was my favourite dessert. As soon as I was finished, I excused myself from the table. I went to the bathroom and threw it all up.

~

Only six months earlier, Megan and I had been admiring Sean from afar. Everyone knew who he was, of course: one of those super-cool, alternative guys who hung out in the coffee shop smoking, drinking coffee, and talking politics between classes. Sean and his friend Dominic were in one of my English classes. They sat lazily in the back and, when prompted to participate, always seemed to be able to relate Bakhtin or Foucault to whatever we were reading. I thought they were brilliant. I had drawn a bright red circle around Sean's photo in the college's student directory—fondly known to freshmen as the Wish Book.

Whenever Sean and his gang came to Rumours, the college bar that year, they arrived in a pack, all wearing slim black pants, black leather boots, and flowing shirts. They stood in line bored, talking only to each other and refusing to be distracted by anyone else. In the bar, they chose a table in the dark corner far from the dance floor and leaned back in their chairs, smoking, contemptuous of this small town and its small-town bar and its small-town people, as though everything was entirely inadequate. The girls that came with them were tall and skinny with dyed black bobbed hair and pale white faces. The guys wore earrings and grew their hair long. Sean's auburn hair was wavy and thick and hung well below his shoulders. He had a strong square jaw and icy green eyes. With his hair parted down the middle, his pointy buckled boots, and his long coat, he looked a lot like The Cult's Ian Astbury, which, I found out later, was no accident.

One night my friends and I were standing in line in the cold, our nylons and black mini-skirts doing nothing to keep us warm. Suddenly Megan gave us a pointed look and tilted her head toward the back of the line. I turned, as inconspicuously as possible, and saw that Sean and Dominic and the rest of their group were right behind us in line. I mouthed to my friends, "Wow!" and Megan mouthed back, "I know!" We had just made it to the rope when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Sean, smiling, head cocked. He held my hair clip in his hand. "Yours?" he asked.

"It fell out!" I said, grabbing it out of his hand and turning away in panic. Just then, the bouncer let us through.

"It fell out?" Roxy said, giggling, as we stood at the bar. "You get the golden opportunity the rest of us could only dream of, and all you can say is, 'It fell out'?"

"I know," I moaned, taking a sip of my paralyzer. "I missed my chance."

"Well, you never know," said Lindsay. "He did give you a great smile. Those guys never smile. Why don't you ask him to dance later?"

"Are you crazy? I would *never* have the guts to ask Sean McNary to dance!"

Never came an hour and four paralyzers later. "I'm going in," I declared. "What have I got to lose?"

"Just your dignity!" Roxy yelled after me as I walked to the back corner of the bar.

I walked up to the table, feeling like a clown in my bright pink over-sized T-shirt and big feathered hair. They all turned to stare at me, pale faces hazy behind plumes of cigarette smoke. "You wanna dance?" I asked Sean, as normally as I could.

He looked at his friends with what might have been a smirk (I was just drunk enough not to care) and shrugged. "Why not?" He followed me to the dance floor, and as I passed my friends, they stared at me in disbelief. I heard them start squealing, and I heard Megan say, "Oh my God! He said yes!"

They stared at us when we got on the dance floor, and I shifted to turn my back on them so I wouldn't crack up. "Friends of yours?" he asked, smiling a little, but it was a friendly smile, and the mask he had been wearing with his friends seemed to have dropped. I tried to think of a convincing denial or a witty response, but I just laughed and said, "Yeah."

I was mortified to realize that the dj was playing Clarence Carter's "Strokin.'" Of all the songs he could have played for this magical moment! What bad luck! I stared at the floor to avoid Sean's eyes and my friends' whistles, and I kept reminding myself how uncool it would be to sing along, even though I knew all the words. When the song ended, I had no sooner said "Thanks" and was trying to think of something intelligent to add, when he disappeared back to the far corner of the bar and returned to his laughing friends.

But an hour later, he emerged out of the crowd of drunk college students to tap me on the shoulder and lead me to the dance floor. "This song is more my style," he said, as the dj started playing The Doors:

> *Hello, I love you*
> *Won't you tell me your name?*
> *Hello, I love you*
> *Let me jump in your game!*

As we danced, he leaned close to me and said, "My name is Sean McNary."

"I know," I said and immediately regretted it. "From English class."

"And you?" he prompted, smiling.

"Oh! Vanessa Stanley."

"Vanessa Stanley," he repeated. We danced without speaking, and he disappeared as soon as the music faded. But the next day, he looked me up in the Wish Book and called me.

~

For my first date with Sean, Megan and Roxy searched their closets and managed to find a black T-shirt and black Levis. They de-poofed my permed hair as best they could. I wore my black flats. Not very cool, but it was the best we could do on short notice.

Sean and I went to Tim Horton's, and I drank a cup of coffee even though I hated coffee. I listened as he talked, and I tried hard not to say anything dumb. He was an

English/philosophy double major. At least we had English in common. He asked what I thought of our Modern poetry class. I struggled to think of something intelligent to say, and I remembered something he had said about T.S. Eliot in class the week before, so I did my best to echo it back.

He looked impressed. "Who's your favourite philosopher?" he asked.

I couldn't think of any way to fake an answer to that one. "I haven't taken any philosophy courses. Yet."

"You've got to," he said. "It'll blow your mind."

I nodded seriously. "Maybe I will in the fall."

"Yeah, we'll get you sorted out yet." He cocked his head and stared at me until I blushed. "You're so pretty," he said. "You know, you'd look really cool with more earrings."

~

After our second coffee date, he kissed me. Me! A chubby, big-haired, dorky farm-girl! Kissing Sean McNary! When he wanted to sleep with me a few weeks later, I was already in love, so I didn't argue. My ear lobes were red and swollen because the two new holes I'd had punched in each of them got infected after I took out the piercing studs and replaced them with trendy silver hoops the first day. So I had to be really careful about keeping my head straight on the pillow or else they'd hurt and bleed.

The whole time, which was really only a few minutes anyway, I had trouble concentrating. All I could think was, *I'm sleeping with Sean McNary!* It was too unreal. I was like Kelly McGillis sleeping with Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. It was as if I was in a movie and already rehearsing the review. My friends would never believe it.

Afterwards, as he lay beside me in the dim light, he started to cry. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't used to guys crying. "What's wrong?" I asked, turning over carefully to keep my head propped up on my hand and my earlobe off the pillow.

"I feel so dirty," he said.

I was shocked. I didn't say anything. What could I have said? I felt as filthy as a street hooker with a raging case of syphilis.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he said, trying to get his tears under control. "Not with you. The connection was supposed to be up here." He tapped my forehead gently and then touched his own. "It was supposed to be different. Not just like everybody else."

Then he sat up and fumbled for his clothes. "I've got to get going. My parents are going to kill me for coming in so late." He flipped on the lamp and struggled with his jeans. "You're such a distraction," he said, attempting a smile.

"I'm sorry," I said, which seemed to be the only thing to say.

~

I haven't talked to Megan since we met at Boston Pizza. I've left a few phone messages on her machine, but she doesn't return them, so I've sort of given up. I don't deal well with rejection. Every week I send what I hope is a cheerful, witty e-mail updating her on what I'm doing in Edmonton, which is madly writing about all the things that have happened in the past few years. She responds with short e-mails, saying things like, "Things are so crazy here. Meeting the florist in an hour. Gotta go."

She calls on the last day of June. The wedding is only a few weeks away. I'm actually nervous as I talk to her. I wonder if she's going to tell me she's asked someone else to do the speech. But instead she asks, "You still up for doing the toast to the bride?"

"Of course," I say. "Actually, it's almost done."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, I just wanted to say—. Well it's just that Matt's parents know lots of really important people. So, um, just make sure it's clean, and that you don't say anything bad about me."

"What could I possibly say about you that would be bad?"

"Well, you know, about my past—"

I can't help but laugh out loud. "Your *past*? You mean the fact that when you were in college a decade ago you went to the bar on weekends?"

"Yeah, well, Matt's family is—"

"Don't worry, Megan," I say. "There's absolutely nothing bad in my speech. I'm just telling the truth about you."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"My God! It's not like you've ever slept around or done drugs or robbed banks or anything!" There is silence on the line, and I rein myself in. "Megan," I say, super-gently. "Don't worry. I would never ever do anything to spoil your wedding. I love you, and I think you're wonderful, and that's all I'm going to say in my speech."

"Oh, I know," she says, and I can hear tears behind her voice. "It's just that everything is so out of control—" she breaks off. "Look, I've gotta go. I'll see you in a couple of weeks, okay?"

"Megan?" I say, but she's already hung up.

~

July

When I'm down in Calgary visiting Claire one weekend, she tells me, "You could make a Plan B, you know."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

She shows me a copy of *People,* with a cover story about celebrity single moms. Rosie O'Donnell has adopted three children. She's on a mission to give more adoption rights to single parents. Jodie Foster has no husband or boyfriend, but has had two babies by artificial insemination. Do both kids have the same father? No one knows. Callista Flockhart, according to the article, is thinking about adopting a baby. The author of the article calls their decisions "Plan B," a chance for women who don't have husbands to have children on their own. I wonder what the laws in Alberta are like. If Rosie and Jodie and Callista can do it, why can't I?

~

Megan's wedding day arrives. I have tried to be positive and enthusiastic in response to all the e-mails about flowers and cakes and veils, but deep down I am terrified for her. I can't bear the thought of someone I love so much going through as much pain as I did.

I arrive early at the hotel to check up on her. She is lying on the couch, watching TV with her hair done and veil on, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. She is in great spirits, very excited. I help her put on her dress. Matt's little brother, Scott, stops by to drop off the bouquets. Megan introduces us with a smirk. She has wanted me to meet him for so long. I shake his hand and say, "Nice to meet you." Behind his back, I roll my eyes at Megan.

"He is *so* not my type," I whisper after he leaves.

"Well, fine," she says, exasperated, and it occurs to me that today Megan might actually have other things on her mind besides me. "Just be nice to him, for goodness sake!"

I promise to be nice to him. For Megan's sake. At the reception, I introduce him to Megan's friends and invite him to stop by our table. I dance with him twice. After the wedding is over, I forget all about him.

~

After a momentary lapse into self-centred tears when Megan's burgundy-clad older sister marches down the aisle without me, I am reassured when I see Megan enter the church. She is grinning fiercely. Matt, waiting at the altar, is beaming, too. The four parents look pleased. I relax. Maybe I'm just so cynical that I've overreacted: the stereotypical bitter divorcée. Maybe I was jealous that Megan has an opportunity to make things work in a way that I couldn't. Maybe everything will be okay, after all. Matt cries throughout the vows. I tell myself he really does love her, and that's all that matters.

At the reception I sit with Roxy and Lindsay and their boyfriends and two other couples we knew from college. I am the only single person at the table, but I am surprised to realize that it doesn't bother me much this time. During the meal, I make hasty changes to my two-page toast to the bride. Suddenly supper is over and the MC is at the mic, and I am the first one to speak. One quick deep breath, and I begin.

My knees and voice shake at first. Then I look at Megan, and I say all these wonderful true things about her, and I tell her how much I love her, and it becomes easier because I'm talking—not to the other three hundred people in the room—but to the old Megan that I know as well as I know myself. I come to the end and realize I forgot to bring my glass of sparkling grape juice, but everyone else toasts the bride, and she smiles, and I know it was good.

Scott gives the toast to his brother, the groom. He talks about how much he admires Matt, how Matt is a role model for how to live life and be a better person. He chokes up. I tell myself that I have been unfair. I can't argue with his description of Matt as wonderful guy. Maybe everyone was right; maybe it does just come down to jealousy. Yet I wouldn't trade places with Megan for all the money in the world.

Matt approaches me after the reception. "That was a great toast, Vanessa," he says. "Thanks for saying such nice things about Megan."

"What else would I say?" I ask, prickling. "I'm her best friend." And even as I say it, I realize that however much I wish it was true, it no longer is. The distance between us grows and grows, and as much as I want to blame it on the way she's changing, I can't help but wonder if it's my fault for refusing to accept the change. Anger creeps into my voice. "It was all true."

"I know," he says.

"She's a wonderful person, Matt. *You're* the one who's lucky!"

He looks bewildered. "I know that," he says.

"You'd better," I spit, and I turn away to leave him standing alone.

~

I feel better after I've made several sneaky trips to the hotel lounge for some red wine and danced with my friends and their boyfriends. The evening goes by in a quick blur. Just after midnight, the dj starts playing slow songs, and I ask Megan to dance with me. She laughs and agrees, and she has to hold me steady on the dance floor.

"I guess this will give them something to talk about at the hospital," she says.

"Nah, you're married now," I say. "That'll put a quick end to all the lesbian gossip."

We dance a little more. "You look so beautiful today," I tell her. "This was a perfect wedding."

"I know," she says. "I am so incredibly happy."

"Then I'm happy, too."

~

Later, in my hotel room, I pull off my shoes and flop back, exhausted, onto the queen-sized bed. I empty my little purse and pull out the wedding souvenirs. I realize that there's a Bible verse attached to the little candles that everyone got to take home. It's from the Book of Ruth:

> *But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."*

I suppose it's meant to be very romantic. But it only seems ominous to me.

~

Claire is up in Camrose for the weekend visiting her parents. The day after the wedding I have lunch with them, and I bring the photos that I had developed at Walmart that morning.

Claire and Amy look at the pictures. "There's Megan," Claire tells her. Amy nods earnestly.

"What is Megan called on her special day?" Claire prompts.

"A bri-ide," Amy says softly. Claire beams with pride. Amy's vocabulary has been increasing exponentially lately.

"And what does a bride look like?" Claire asks.

"A princess," Amy parrots in an awe-filled, breathy voice.

"That's right," Claire says. "She looks just like a princess."

~

The night before my wedding, four years ago this month, I went outside to escape all the people in my parents' house. I sat on the deck with my legs dangling off the edge. It was already midnight, but the air was hot and smelled sweet, of sweating earth and grass. I was daydreaming about how my entire life would change in twenty-four hours, when suddenly it flashed into my head that my marriage would only last two years. It felt as sure and inevitable as the sun rising the next morning. It seems strange to me now that this didn't raise an alarm. I told myself it was cold feet, pre-wedding jitters, and I rushed back into the house to be engulfed by the bustle of last minute preparations.

Claire tells me that when she stepped through the doors of the church with her father and began to walk down the red-carpeted aisle, she knew that her marriage would not last a year. But she went ahead and walked down the aisle anyway.

Her predication was off a week. Mine was off by twenty-one days. It is astounding what we instinctively knew, yet ignored. Years of conditioning had taught us to ignore our intuition, and, at all costs, to avoid rocking the boat or causing embarrassment. How could Claire have turned and run out the door instead of down the aisle? How could I have gone back into the house and found the voice to say, *Stop the preparations!*? We were more terrified of taking control than we were of being unhappy.

~

The summer I was twelve my parents packed my brother and me into the Le Mans and drove us to British Columbia. We hit all the tourist spots: Hell's Gate, Buchart Gardens, the Capilano Bridge, Flintstone Park. One hot day we were at Stanley Park, and we had just watched the whale show. Kent and I decided to spend some of our saved-up allowance money on souvenirs. I couldn't find anything I liked in the gift shop, but he found a treasure. He chose a snow-globe—a plastic, liquid-filled dome with tiny plastic whales floating inside. *Stanley Park* was written across the bottom in bright gold letters. He shook it in front of me to make the flakes swirl, and asked if I thought Grandma would like it. I told him she'd love it, so he carefully counted out the money from his wallet and bought it.

Dad told us we had to hurry if we were going to make the ferry to Vancouver Island that evening. As we trotted across the hot parking lot, Kent couldn't resist one more look at his purchase. He pulled it out of the paper bag, and shook it, holding it up so the sunlight bounced off the white sparkles.

Dad said, "Put that away until you get in the car. You're going to break it!"

My brother gave the globe one last vigourous shake, and it slipped from his hand and skidded across the asphalt. He ran to pick it up. The plastic had cracked and water seeped out to make a black stain on the pavement. We all stopped.

"Well, it's of no use now," Dad said. "You might as well throw it away."

Kent's eyes filled with tears.

"Can't we go back and get another one?" I asked.

"We're already late for the ferry," Dad said.

"Please, Dad," I begged.

"It's all right. I don't care," my brother said, his lip quivering and tears slipping down his cheeks.

"He doesn't want another one," Dad said. "Now get in the car."

"I'll use my own money," I pleaded. "Look, I have enough!" I pulled my wallet out of the back pocket of my cut-offs.

"That's enough, Vanessa," Dad said. "Get in the car. We're late."

I got in the back seat behind my father. My brother jogged over to a garbage can and tossed the globe in, then he ran to the car and got in behind mom. "I'm ready, Dad," he said. We buckled our seat belts. Dad steered the car out of the parking lot, and Mom began to unfold the map. I tried to think of something to say that would convince Dad to turn around and go back to the shop, but I couldn't. Kent and I slouched in the corners of the back seat. He stared out the window, struggling to stop the tears. I sat glaring at the back of my dad's headrest, helpless and silent.

~

After Evan left, I auditioned lawyers. I didn't intend to, but after the first one I realized it was necessary. He was my dad's age, I'd say, probably pushing sixty. I explained what I wanted, and he asked questions about the house and Evan's business. Then he said, "Do you mind me asking what happened?" And I told him, and those stupid tears started plopping down as I spoke.

He shook his head. "That guy was a damn fool if you ask me!" He handed me a Kleenex. "Don't worry about it," he advised. "You're young and you're—" his eyes traveled over me—"attractive. There are plenty of fish in the sea. You'll find another one."

What he didn't understand was that I didn't care if there were a million fish in the sea. I only wanted one fish. Mine. And my fish didn't want me. Nothing else mattered.

~

I go home to the farm for a visit. There is a continuous growl in the sky today. Pairs of fighter jets fly so high in the sky that they are only specks. They come down from the north, make U-turns high above my parents' farmyard, and head back north to the air base at Cold Lake. It's Operation Maple Leaf, my mom tells me. She knows because it's been in the news. Normally people around here just ignore such planes, but since September 11, everyone's jumpy. The first day of the operation, the base and the media were flooded with calls, so the military issued public announcements.

I go to Larson's Store with my dad to pick up some milk and a newspaper. Dad wants to have coffee with some of his neighbours, so I wander off for a walk. Two buildings away from the store is the school. School's out and the yard is empty, so I go in to take a look around. The trees we planted along the main road in 1980 for Alberta's seventy-fifth anniversary are now about fifteen feet tall. The school looks tiny. I guess it always was, but it certainly never felt so at the time.

I wander around the west end of the school and walk north across the ball diamonds. There are four huge evergreens there. Terrence and I used to sit in their shade. Kerri Lynn once planted watermelon seeds there. They never grew. The page-wire fence separating the schoolyard from Belshiem's pasture is sagging exactly as it did twenty years ago. I look across the fence into the tangled brush, and make an easy step over the wire. There's little undergrowth and the cow path is covered with dry leaves. I follow the trail, stepping over fallen poplar trunks.

Several metres in, I see something gleaming in the leaves at the base of a tree. It's white and round. I come closer. I realize what it looks like, and I blink to adjust my vision. It can't be. But it is. A softball, half-buried in the debris. I squat down and touch it tentatively. I pick it up, expecting to find it old and discoloured, but it's bright white and looks hardly used. This is too weird. I look around, almost expecting someone to jump out of the trees and say, *Ha ha! Gottcha!* But there is no one but me. No sound but my breath and the wind and the crackle of twigs beneath my feet as I stand up, softball in hand, held in wonder.

~

My first kiss came at the end of Grade 8. There was a new boy, Darren, in our grade, and as the only boy in a class of six girls and the oldest boy in the school (there were no Grade 9ers at all that year), he got a lot of attention. One day during P.E., someone hit a foul ball into the bush. Mr. Nielsen sent me and Darren in after it; since there were no spares, the game had to wait until we found it. We found the ball right away, back about thirty feet in the bush, but Darren stopped before picking it up. He turned around and suddenly clamped his hands around my hips and ground his body against me. He leaned down and pushed his lips on mine. They were hot and wet and tasted like cigarettes. I was so surprised that I just stood there with my mouth half-open, about to say, "Oh!"

The air shuddered and filled with noise, and we looked up to see a low-flying fighter jet disappearing north over the trees. Darren dropped his hands, and I clapped my hands over my ears to shut out the noise.

"If you tell anyone about that," he said, "I'll kill you." Then he grabbed the softball and jogged back to the ball diamond. After that, he always acted like he was mad at me. He hardly spoke to me for the rest of the year.

It wasn't at all like in the *Sweet Dreams* books, and it wasn't the way I had hoped it would be, but it was my first kiss, and once I'd had it, it couldn't be re-done.

~

When I get back to Edmonton, I make an appointment with the professor in charge of programs for grad students at the university. He is younger than I expected, and his manner is informal and friendly. I explain that I took one course last term, and that I would like to switch from part-time status to full-time in the fall. He tells me it's no problem; I just need to register in the courses I want. There is a pause. "Anything else?" he asks.

I ask him about the creative writing thesis option in the MA programme. I ask in a vague, hypothetical way, as though I am not really very interested. He explains the requirements to me. He tells me how to go about finding a supervisor.

"So," I ask nonchalantly. "If a person wanted to go ahead and do that, how would a person get permission for it?"

"One doesn't have to get permission, exactly," he answers, smiling. "One just starts writing and then tries to find a supervisor who is willing to work with him or her."

"Interesting," I say.

"So, have you started writing yet?" he asks.

I feel myself blush, and suddenly I start babbling. "Well, I started writing these blurbs in this week-long course I just did, about a girl who is going through a divorce, and I think if they were put together, they could fit together somehow, you know, because there are so many single people now over thirty and they want to have relationships but all the rules are changing." I wait for him to laugh, or to say that's not the sort of thing they do here.

"Well," he says. "I think we might have a couple of people in the department who would be interested in that sort of thing. Maybe you can explain it to them and see what they think. Let me give you their names."

~

Zack doesn't come to Alberta in July. He calls, but there's no mention of a trip. We chat, and he asks what I've been up to. "Have you been doing lots of painting?" he asks.

"Painting?" I say.

"Don't you paint?"

"No," I say. There's an awkward pause. "I write a bit."

"Oh, you write? I didn't know that. That's really cool!" he says. It's funny, even after years of sparse communication, even after him not making any move when I came to London, it takes *Oh, you write?* to make me finally clue in that I am not to Zack what he is to me.

~

I go to Megan's in Camrose to clean out my room there. She's going to be selling the house at the end of the month so she and Matt can move to Edmonton. They're still away on their honeymoon, so the house is quiet. I pack up the few clothes that I haven't moved to Kent's yet. I take down the clippings taped to the mirror—photos of Will Smith, Johnny Depp, and Lance Bass—and throw them away. Then I tackle the closet. I pull down a box of letters and stationery. There's a half-written card to Zack on top, and a CD that I made him of my current favourite songs. I decide not to send it. I'll appreciate listening to it more than he ever would. I am happy to be his friend, but that's all we'll ever be. I've given up on the fantasy of him being my Mr. Right, sent from heaven just for me. I've given up on the fantasy of Mr. Right at all. I think relationships are more about work than they are about magic. It doesn't mean I won't be happy to be in one again, when I am ready.

I throw out the last shirt left from the wardrobe I had when Evan and I were together. My transformation is complete: new perfume, longer hair, new glasses, and, now, a new wardrobe. There are no sweaters that Evan bought me for Christmas. No lingerie he brought home as a surprise. No jacket he spotted in the window of Rickis that was totally me. Nothing he saw me in. Nothing he touched me in. Another step to erasing him from my body.

I load the boxes into my car. I do a final cleaning of the room, sweeping the dust bunnies from under the bed. Then I climb in my car and drive to Edmonton, finally leaving Camrose behind.

~

August

I watch a CBC documentary about the adoption of Chinese girls by Canadian families. Couples who would have to wait up to ten years for a baby in Canada get one from China in about a year. The Chinese government, which wants the girls off its hands, keeps the regulations simple, consistent, and corruption-free. It costs several thousand dollars, but, according to the narrator, the babies have no more risk of health problems than the average baby put up for adoption in Canada. The show ends with footage of a get-together of three-year-old Chinese girls and their parents in Toronto. The toddlers are so cute and look so happy. The parents are joyous and grateful. I notice that not all the parents come in pairs. The voice-over mentions that in Chinese adoptions, unlike Canadian ones, it is equally easy for unmarried women in their thirties with steady incomes to adopt.

It starts to sink in that it would be possible for me to have a daughter without having a husband.

Hmmm.

~

Roxy reminds me that my date-free six months are almost up. “I could fix you up with another of Jeff’s co-workers,” she offers.

“We’ll see,” I say. “I’m not in any rush.” I’m not entirely against the idea, and I appreciate her thinking about me, but I would certainly do things differently this time.

I am excited about going back to school full-time. I imagine myself becoming a famous writer and buying a rustic cabin overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I imagine myself becoming a university professor and buying an elegant old farmhouse overlooking a creek. I start to work on my writing more seriously. I read Natalie Goldberg and Peter Elbow, and I commit to writing everyday.

I think more about having children. I realize that I am willing to do it alone. One night I call Claire to talk about it. "I'm doing it," I say. "I'm making Plan B."

"You're going to have a baby *now*?"

"No, no," I assure her. "Not right now. When I turn thirty-five. I still want to give myself time to find a partner, but if I don't have one by then, I'll do it on my own." Somehow, I'm just not quite ready to give up entirely; having a baby now would indicate that I have no hope of ever being in a relationship again. But there's still a possibility if I wait a few years. Besides, I need time to finish graduate school and get a job to support the little tyke. "You wouldn't believe how much pressure that releases, knowing that I can do it myself, and that I don't have to frantically rush to find a boyfriend—*any* boyfriend. I can go on with my life and get the things I want, while keeping an eye out for a really great guy in the meantime. It's so freeing. And at the same time, I feel so in control. I feel really good about it." I grew up thinking a husband was the magic key to everything wonderful in life: children, a nice house, a satisfying career, and, well, happiness. After Evan left, I thought that my lack of a man was a roadblock to all my destinations. But now I realize that a husband is only one of many good things to look for in life, that having the rest is not dependent on having him, that I could have other great things even without him. Now I realize that the only roadblock was me. I feel hopeful again.

"Wow!" Claire says.

Wow is right.

~

I run into Matt's brother, Scott, again at Matt and Megan's housewarming party at their new townhouse in Edmonton. Obviously Megan has given up on matchmaking because she didn't even mention that he was coming.

It's definitely a couples' party. I am the only single girl. There are three single guys: Ian (who is certainly gay, even if no one else will admit it), Matt's friend Calvin (whom I'm steering clear of since I suspect he likes me and he is not my type), and Scott, who is twenty-five and holding onto a three-litre bottle of Heineken.

It's not that there's anything *wrong* with Scott. He's…handsome. But handsome is not *in*. What's *in* is funky, trendy, scrawny guys with bleached-blonde spiky hair, wearing sunglasses, earrings, and backwards baseball caps. Scott is wearing khakis, a button-up shirt, and wire-framed glasses. He would never fit into *NSYNC. He's six-foot-six (seriously!) and husky. Even though he's twenty-five, he looks more like a "man" than a "guy."

Everyone is sitting around reminiscing about Matt and Megan's wedding and looking at photos. Scott says to Matt, "Now that you've taken care of yourself, it's time to get to work on finding a girlfriend for me." Everyone laughs, but Matt nods at him seriously, as though he plans to do just that.

Then Lindsay pipes up, "Well, there's always *Vanessa*!" All eyes swing to me, and I feel my face go hot. Like everyone else, I try to laugh like it's the funniest joke I've ever heard. I look over at Scott, and he's laughing, too.

There's always *Vanessa*. There's *always* Vanessa. Either way, it doesn't sound any better.

~

In spite of that debacle, Scott and I end up sitting side by side more times than can be an accident. I walk past him as he sits on the floor, and I "accidentally" step on his hand on my way to get more baguette and brie from the snack table. On my way back, he grabs my ankle to retaliate. Not unlike junior high.

"Are you actually going to drink all that?" I ask, motioning to the big Heineken bottle.

He laughs. "Of course not. I'm sharing." He waves at the row of guys on the couch holding glasses of beer. "I just like the bottle. Don't you think it would make a great lamp?" I laugh. Not an alcoholic: Check.

He asks me all sorts of intelligent questions about my university program. He tells me corny Osama Bin Laden jokes, and I laugh in spite of myself. I haven't laughed so much in months. I make fun of the fact that he curls. He makes fun of the fact that I'm an English major. We find out that we both like to ski, and he says that if I'm in Calgary sometime, we should go out to Lake Louise for the day.

He asks about my creative writing, and I recount an entertaining version of my experiences in my women's writing course. He laughs. "You're funny," he says. "I like that."

He tells me about his twelve-year-old cat, Mitts, who has been peeing in his shoes. "Well," I say lightly, with farm-girl callousness, between swigs of Mike's Hard Lemonade, "You could just have her put down."

He sighs heavily. "I know. It's inevitable. It's just so hard. I can't imagine the house without her in it."

I stop and look at him, bottle suspended halfway to my mouth. Are those actually tears in his eyes? I really *look* at him. It occurs to me that his eyes are beautifully brown like melted chocolate. I look away so he can't see what I'm thinking. It occurs to me that I could seriously love a guy who loves his cat that much.

Too bad he's not my type.

~

Evan used to tell me horrifying stories about things he and the neighbourhood boys did when they were little, like, for example, drowning cats, setting cats on fire, running cats down with a lawnmower.

I learned in a psychology class that many serial killers tortured animals when they were children.

~

Forest Tent Caterpillar
Malacosoma disstria Hiibner

> *The most common species of the forest tent caterpillar found on the prairies has blue sides and a black back, with a narrow white strip down the centre and irregular orange markings. The larvae hatch in early spring when the aspens leaf out. In June, the caterpillars migrate and swarm in search of food or cocooning sites. The larvae will devour almost any green foliage in their path. Although complete defoliation may occur, typically this does not kill the tree.*

There was a plague of tent caterpillars in Tulliby Lake in 1983. That spring we spent P.E. class hunting for any tents on rose bushes and young poplars within walking distance of the school. Our job was to find the little tents and smash them under our feet. I was good at spotting the triangular white webs, but I just couldn't bring myself to step on them, and I always asked one of the boys to do it. The cocoons would turn into a mess of white webbing and slimy green-and-black remains.

Once the caterpillars were on the move, Mom's garden was a endlessly shifting sea of black. They covered the house in dark sheets moving east. I was afraid to go outside. I couldn't stand stepping on them on the ground beneath me. I couldn't stand them falling onto me from tree branches above. They infiltrated the house, too, wiggling through a crack in a window or hitching a ride on a jean cuff or cap.

My brother decided to confront the creatures head-on. He would zone in on a caterpillar on the siding of the house. He'd use a stapler to make a fence around the caterpillar and carefully cover the corral in white glue. He wouldn't actually touch the caterpillars, though, and I guess he couldn't quite bring himself to hurt them.

~

Two hours later at Megan and Matt's party, I'm into my fourth bottle of hard lemonade and Scott has long ago shared the remains of his Heineken and is having a glass of water. The party is thinning out, and we are standing in the kitchen talking to Matt. Scott leans an elbow on my shoulder. Suddenly my body is on high alert. My face gets hot, and my arm hairs stand at attention. I know he's not drunk, so he can't need something to lean on, and even if he did, the fridge would be a much sturdier choice. I look up, way up, at this too-tall husky guy who wears wire-rimmed glasses and works on a computer every day from 8 to 5. No leather jacket. No bleached hair. No piercings. No haunted look in his eyes. He looks down at me, and our eyes meet. Then he lifts his hand—God, he has such huge hands—and just briefly he cups the back of my head and lets his palm slide down my hair. My mind melts, and there's an ache in my abdomen that I haven't felt in a long time. My world freezes for a moment, and I'm surprised to see that Matt's and Scott's lips are still moving. I struggle to bring myself back to the room and the conversation.

Everyone leaves but Scott and me. We sit close on the couch, talking to Matt and Megan. I try so hard to be civilized, but it's been a long time, and I let my hand sneak between us, and I stroke my little finger against his. He moves to put his arm across the back of the couch. I can see Matt getting nervous, and I tell myself to proceed with caution, but I'm just buzzed enough to be completely selfish. I lift up my hand, slide it up the back of the couch, and put it in his big hand. I feel tiny.

Matt says abruptly that he's tired, and maybe he should give me a ride home.

I don't want to leave. "I could sleep on the couch and help clean up in the morning," I suggest. Matt gets up and gets my jacket from the closet.

"I think it'd be better if you go now." I see he's losing patience, so I give in. I fumble through my purse to find a pen and slip of paper so I can write down my e-mail address. "Write me?" I ask Scott.

"I will," he says. I try not to stumble on the way out.

Sitting in the back of Matt's car, I think about Scott's cat. I am fascinated by this guy who is tender enough to cry over his cat and still makes me laugh so hard my stomach aches. I think about this other world of guys who want women to have brains, guys who prioritize relationships over sex, guys who have never before been my type. I remember Scott's big hand on the nape of my neck, and I imagine his hands cupping my shoulders and my hips. I imagine him kissing me. Matt and Megan are silent in the front seat.

I try to wrap my brain around what has just happened. It's so strange. I remember my six-month vow, and I realize that my time is up tomorrow. What a coincidence! I laugh out loud. Matt looks at me sternly in the rearview mirror. "Sorry," I mutter, trying unsuccessfully to put on a serious face.

Very strange indeed…I've fallen for a nice guy. I've fallen for a *nice* guy. The implications are staggering.

~

I wake up the next morning already smiling. It was a good night. I lazily wonder whether I'll see Scott again. Even if I don't, I've made a breakthrough, I think. I've found out that I can be attracted to a normal guy. Sans leather jacket. Sans addictions. Sans emotional wreckage. He said he'd e-mail. He said we should get together for coffee. Sigh.

Minutes later, as I gather last night's clothes from the floor, my euphoria fades. My sweater has a long trail of melted brie encrusted onto it. I was talking to him with cheese stuck to my shirt! How humiliating! I swear that I am going to stop drinking so much. Even though I wasn't really that drunk, I was obviously tipsy enough not to notice a pound of cheese on my sweater. If I don't stop drinking, I will a) never get a man, and worse, b) become the token alcoholic of the group whom everyone invites to parties just to laugh at.

I glance through the titles on my bookshelf. I hover over *The Rules* and *Dating: A Survival Guide* and *How to Attract Your Ideal Mate* and *In the Meantime*. None of them seems quite right for this morning. Besides, isn't one of those Rules women divorced already? What do they know? I flip through *Bridget Jones* and *The Girls Guide* and *High Fidelity*. No help there, either. I need a plan.

~

It turns out I don't need a plan. On Monday morning, I see his name in my Inbox. I do a little dance. Then I sit back down and read the e-mail. He says he had fun seeing me on the weekend and reminds me that if I come down to Calgary sometime, I should give him a call. His message is chatty and jokey, punctuated with lots of ☺'s.

I remember The Rules and decide to adapt them to this modern communication medium. I wait a day, and then I reply similarly. Casual. Short. Lots of ☺'s so he can't misread my tone. Words in Courier font splashed across a glowing screen can be so easily misinterpreted. I hope he will respond. I hope I'll see him in Calgary sometime. I interrupt my own fantasies about our wedding to remind myself that I always invest too much too soon. I remind myself that I barely know him. I calm myself down.

~

He responds quickly, and I decide to abandon the rules and just write when I want to. We exchange a few chatty e-mails over the next few days. But then he sends an e-mail that is trouble. It's one of those friendship quizzes, you know, where you answer a bunch of personal questions about yourself and then forward the message to several friends, including the one who sent it to you, so they all get to know you better. I look over Scott's answers. I am surprised to find out that his favourite food is chocolate (a good sign!) and that his favourite spectator sport is hockey (Ugh! Need I say more?).

I breeze through the first dozen questions easily: full name (Vanessa Lynette Stanley), favourite colours (purple and blue), favourite foods (pizza and chocolate), favourite TV shows (*Seinfeld* and *Frasier*). Then I hit the wall: age. I wrack my brain, trying to remember if we talked about age at the party. I know he's 25, from Megan, but does he know I'm 30? I can't remember. Will it matter?

I stare at the screen, trying to decide what to do. I type *30*.

But what if he thinks that's too old? I add in brackets: *Ack! Don't remind me!* Maybe that will soften the blow and make him laugh.

I continue on in the questionnaire. But then I go back to the age question. I don't want it to look like it's a big deal, or like I haven't dealt with it, because I *am* dealing with it, and I'm doing fairly well, I think. I mean, it's just a number. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't have to be a big deal.

I delete my bracketed comment and leave it at 30. It's my age. He can take it or leave it. I know I'm not too old for him; he'll have to decide if he's too young for me. I hit *SEND*.

I check my e-mail later in the afternoon. He still hasn't responded. I wonder if he's been scared off by my age. But I realize there's no way of knowing. He could just as easily be scared off by the fact that I like *Seinfeld* or the colour blue. It's not worth worrying about. Maybe he hasn't even checked his e-mail yet. I decide, consciously, to relax. Maybe he'll e-mail, maybe not. Either way, next time I'm in Calgary, I'll call him like I promised I would. I'll say I'm in town and ask him if he's still up for coffee. Maybe he will be, maybe not.

Either way, it's out of my control. I can only take care of my end of things. Maybe Megan was right months ago when she told me to let go of the things I couldn't change. I remember a verse we memorized when I was ten, which I never fully understood until now: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* I know that it's going to be different this time. I know that I am not going to cry myself to sleep if he doesn't e-mail back. I am not going to phone him five times to ask him out for drinks. I am not going to interrogate my friends about why he doesn't like me and what's wrong with me. It's not because I don't like him, because I really do, but because I'm different now. I've already learned something from meeting him, and I'm grateful for that and it's enough. If we end up going for coffee next time I'm in Calgary, I'll be really happy. But if we don't, I'll be just as happy.

~

September

I drive down to Calgary to stay with Claire for the Labour Day weekend. It's my last weekend before I become a full-time student. We spend Friday night painting our nails and watching *Shakespeare in Love* for the fifth time. I love Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare. Claire thinks he's too nerdy looking. "He looks like he never sees the sun," she says.

We talk about how our criteria for men are changing. I tell her that having someone who is kind and compassionate and smart is way up there on my list above looks or clothes or charisma now. She agrees. She says that she's learned that a guy with money is not necessarily a thoughtful husband or a kind partner. "But," she said. "It would be a bonus to find a guy who was rich. It'd kill my ex, because even though I might have changed what I look for, he still measures himself against other guys by money."

"That's funny," I say. "I think that may be true of Evan, too, but with looks instead of money. He wouldn't care if I met the most kind, gentle, romantic guy in the universe, but he would still think he's better than him if he thought the guy was ugly."

"So you need to get a gorgeous guy to piss Evan off!"

"Not at all," I say. "The great thing about it is that I absolutely don't care what he thinks anymore.

"I wish I could get to that place," Claire says.

~

Before I came down, I e-mailed Scott about getting together for coffee. He invited me to a friend's birthday party on Saturday night instead. As I get ready to go out, I realize I'm not sure if this is a date or not. I mean, I'm the one who initiated getting together, not him. Maybe he invited me to the party only out of politeness. But then I remember the sparks I felt at Megan's party, and I know that I didn't imagine them.

He shows up right on time. When we get outside, two people wait in a red Mazda, a guy driving and a girl in the back. He introduces his friends to me. He flips up the front passenger seat to let me into the back. Perhaps it's not a date after all. At the party, he is careful not to stray too far from me, and he makes sure that I'm involved in conversations, but he sits about a foot away from me on the couch. I start to wonder if I misread his signals after all. In any case, he's nice, and I could use a new friend. So I relax and enjoy myself.

No one really "dates" anymore. It used to be that a guy would show up with flowers, open the car door, and treat a girl to dinner and a movie. Then he'd drive her home and kiss her good-night on the front porch. Nowadays, people are more likely to sleep together than they are to go on a formal date. They decide whether they're going out after they've tested each other out in bed. Everything is backwards. So, getting together for coffee can mean *I like you as a friend*, or it can mean much more. A date might be Rollerblading or rock-climbing. The guy might offer to pay, or he might not. The girl might accept, or she might not. They might both spend the entire evening wondering about the other's intentions. Like I'm doing with Scott. It's all very confusing. The courting rituals have all disappeared, and there's nothing to replace them.

Scott makes me laugh. We talk politics. He is funny and smart. We somehow get on the topic of gender roles, and I tell him I didn't go to university for four years so that I could cook and clean for someone else.

"Really?" he says, laughing.

"Yeah."

"So then why did you major in English? I thought English majors spent their university career practicing, "Do you want fries with that?'"

I laugh

When he and his friends drop me off at Claire's place, he walks me to the door, thanks me for coming, and says good night. He is just about to walk away, when he turns back and says, "If you have time tomorrow night, maybe we could get dinner and a movie?"

"I'd really like that," I say, smiling.

~

After Evan left me, I was not good company. As the weeks waned, so did people's patience with me. They didn't want to hear any more about me and Evan or Evan and Brandi. *You have to get over it*, they told me, *you have to move on.*

What they didn't realize was that I *didn't* have to get over it. I could have brooded for ever and ever, if I wanted to. I could have lost my job, become homeless, and wandered through the streets muttering Evan's name to strangers. I could have committed myself to the mental hospital at Ponoka. I could have jumped off the High Level Bridge. I could have gassed myself in my garage. I didn't *have to* get over it. Everyone wanted me to—often I wondered if it was for my sake or theirs—but I didn't have to. I may not have wanted to. I may not have been able to.

If I were on *Oprah*, Dr. Phil would have asked, *What's in it for you?*

What did I get out of it?

I escaped from an impossibly unhappy situation, and everyone knew it was entirely his fault. Marge, my counselor, tried to help me take responsibility for my role in the collapse of the marriage, and I parroted phrases about how it takes two to make a marriage and two to destroy it. I wasn't perfect either, I told people. But when I said that, it only made me look better in their eyes, me taking half the responsibility, me refusing to blame him entirely, me trying bravely to equate my squeezing the toothpaste from the centre of the tube to his having a six-month affair behind my back. It made him look like even more of a monster. It made me seem even more of a victim. I could erase all the things I did wrong: the way I made him feel like a pervert just for wanting to have sex with me, the way I corrected him in front of his friends, the way I acted like some kind of saint who was sacrificing everything she could have been to be with the one she loved.

So I played the innocent victim. I let them think he was a heartless monster. I desperately needed the reassurance of that black-and-white portrayal, because if there wasn't something horribly wrong with him, it could mean there was something horribly wrong with me. And then I really would be alone forever.

So I kept telling my story. I kept repeating the mean things he said. I kept looking for sympathy. Everyone got tired of it. They told me to get over it. To move on. Eventually I got tired of it, too.

~

Scott is the most amazing guy I have ever dated. He is so easy-going and kind. There are no melodramatic declarations of passion like I used to get from Evan, but there are no bouts of impatient rage either. It is peaceful. He buys me flowers. He e-mails me from work. We talk on the phone. I don't know him well enough to know if I want to marry him yet, of course, but he seems like the kind of person I would want to marry.

We take turns. Every second weekend, one of us makes the three-hour drive on Highway 2 to visit the other. At first, I stay at Claire's in Calgary, and he stays at Matt and Megan's in Edmonton. Within a few weeks, though, we start spending nights at one another's places. We sleep in the same bed, but we don't have sex. I tell him I'm not ready, and he tells me he's not ready either. I think I must be dreaming.

Everyone always says that right when you least expect it, right when you stop looking, Mr. Right appears in your life as if by magic and luck. I never believed it, even after it happened for Megan. But now I think there's something to it, even if I still don't believe there's any such thing as Mr. Right. Someone once said that luck is the junction of preparation and opportunity. I think that this applies to love, too. Had Scott appeared in my life a year earlier, I wouldn't have been interested in him at all. Had I not taken six months to think about what I wanted, I wouldn't have accepted him as readily as I did.

Don't get me wrong—Scott is not perfect. I mean, he doesn't look like Lance Bass. He enjoys the odd Adam Sandler movie. He supports Ralph Klein's move to cut funding for the arts. But I have never met another guy that I like being with so much.

Time with him is fun and funny and peaceful. And I've never met any guy—Evan included, certainly—that I actually *like* and respect so much, once all the infatuation and hormones were stripped away. We both vote Liberal. We both grew up Lutheran. We can agree on music and movies. We both like animals and want to live in the country. We both like to travel. He says he'll take a week off during my Spring Break so we can go to Cuba. Things are very, very good.

We talk about relationships one night. "I've always wondered how I will *know* when I've met the perfect person," he says. "I wonder how long it takes for that bolt of lightning when everything just becomes clear."

I think for a minute. "I don't think that's how love works at all," I say. "At least once you're past twenty-five."

"That's how Matt says it was with him and Megan. He just *knew* on their third date that she was The One."

"Well, I believe him," I say. "But I've thought *I've* known before, and I've been wrong." I think of Evan. Of Zack and Sean and Noah. "I think Matt could just as easily have been wrong. It's a great story to tell your kids when it works, but everyone seems to forget those bolts of lightning after they've broken up and moved on."

He considers this. "So how do you think it works?" he asks.

I hesitate. How can I explain it? Then it comes to me. "I think love is more like waves on a beach. When the tide comes in, it comes in slowly, little by little. Each wave pushes ahead just a few millimetres from the last one. It happens so gradually that if you were to watch it, you wouldn't see it happen. But somehow, by the end of the day, the tide is in, and the water has moved way up the beach. I think that's how love works. Not a sudden bolt of lightning, but little waves, building on each other gradually, and then one day you look around, and the landscape of your beach has changed, and then you know you wouldn't want it to be any other way."

~

I adjust to being a university student again. I meet with a potential thesis supervisor on a Thursday morning in the third week of September. I arrive early and sit in the chair outside her office, taking deep yoga breaths to calm my racing heart.

"You want to do a creative writing thesis?" she asks.

I nod.

"What do you want to write about?"

"About me," I say tentatively. I am afraid that she will laugh, that she will tell me that I need to write about something exotic, such as Paris or New York, or something serious, say post-colonial criticism or post-modern theory.

But she just nods, "What *about* you?"

"Well," I say, encouraged. "I want to write about what it's like for me to reach thirty and be single." I pull out the stack of paper from my book bag. "I have all these bits already," I say, leafing through the jumble of loose pages. "But it doesn't have any plot or order yet."

"It sounds interesting," she says, taking a sheet from the top. "But why not just write in your diary?"

"Well, it's not just me. It's all my friends. And women I read about in novels from Japan and England and Germany. We're supposed to be reaping the benefits of feminism in the new millennium, and everything is supposed to be different for us, but in so many ways, nothing has changed. We're still torn in half."

"That sounds like it has potential." Her eyes skim over the page in her hand.

"I don't know if I'm a good enough writer," I say, apologetically.

She looks up at me. "It seems like you have no problem writing grammatical sentences," she says. "Keep writing."

I wonder if that can really be all there is to it. Maybe writing, like love, is more about commitment than magic.

~

One day in the lunch room, while I still worked for the *Gazette*, I pulled up a chair beside Garrett, who was a reporter I admired. "Guess what?" I asked him excitedly.

"What?" he asked.

"Well, I've always had it in the back of my mind that someday I would try to write a novel. But I've never known what it would be about. Well, last night I was lying in bed, and I thought up this totally great plot about a woman who is married and—"

He interrupted me by impatiently brushing his hand in the air above his head. "Vanessa," he said. "You're not old enough to write a novel. You haven't lived enough yet." And because he was fifteen years older than me and because he wrote mystery stories in his spare time and because he was a man, I let my novel deflate in the air between us.

He saw the look on my face, and his expression softened. "Look," he says. "You're young, and you've had an easy life. You haven't lived through anything traumatic. Wait 'til something bad has happened to you; then you can try to write a novel."

~

When Kent's girlfriend, Laurie, asks me about Scott, she doesn't ask (like Lindsay) what he does or (like Claire) what he drives or (like Roxy) what he looks like. She asks what he's *like*. "What two words would best describe his personality?" she asks.

I consider this. "Kind and funny," I say.

"So kind of like Kent?" she says. "Those are the two words I'd use to describe Kent."

"Actually," I say. "I guess he's quite a lot like Kent."

"I think that's a good thing," she says.

I agree.

~

I don't see much of Megan anymore. To be honest, one of the things that attracted me to Scott was the thought that I would be able to see more of Megan through him, but it hasn't happened that way. She declines my invitations to come over for Thursday-night *Friends*. She hasn't invited me to her house since the housewarming party. But one day I invite her for coffee on Whyte Avenue, and she agrees.

We make small talk. The conversation is strained. Perhaps I am being overly analytical, but she looks very tired and very sombre. The spark is gone from her eyes, and the giggle is gone from her voice. I wonder if I have burned some bridge that cannot be rebuilt. In an odd way, I hope so, because the other option is that I was right about her marriage, and that she is already unhappy. This is one time I would love to be wrong.

She doesn't seem like the Megan I knew. Mind you, she hasn't seemed like herself for months. I wonder if this is how she *is* now or if it's just in reaction to me. Perhaps when she goes home to Matt, she will be the same giddy, light-spirited woman that we both fell in love with. I hope so, for both of their sakes.

I feel like I'm stepping across a minefield, avoiding topics that might make her upset or that may be none of my business now. By the time I go home, I am exhausted.

~

I spend the weekend with Scott in Calgary. We eat at the Olive Garden on Friday night. We watch *Chocolat* on video, then light a fire and lie on the rug on the floor. He strokes my hair.

"There's something we haven't talked about yet that's been bothering me," he says.

"What's that?" I ask. And my heart goes *thump thump thump* in that way that hearts do when they fear that something is going to drive a sharp wedge in them.

"I get the idea that you're going to want to have kids someday."

"Yeah, I do." I prop myself up on my elbow to look at him. "You?"

"And I guess because you're already thirty you'll want to have them pretty soon?"

"Yeah." *Thump thump thump*. "Within the next few years, I imagine." I don't mention Plan B.

"The thing is—" he begins. "I don't want to say it because I don't want to ruin anything."

I know exactly what he's going to say, but I make him say it anyway. "What?"

"It's just that I've never been able to picture myself having kids. Even if I ever did, I can't see it happening for, like, ten years or so."

"Oh."

"Do you hate me?" he asks, pulling me close, and I can see that he wishes he weren't telling me this.

"No." I sigh, burying my head in his chest. "I don't hate you at all. That's the problem."

"I don't want to break things off," he says. "I like you very much. This is the most amazing relationship I've ever had."

"I like you, too. Very much."

"I want to be with you," he says. "Give me some time to think about this. Be patient with me for now, and we'll talk about it again?"

"Okay," I agree.

~

On the last weekend in September, I'm not seeing Scott, so I drive home to Tulliby Lake to visit Mom and Dad. I go to church with my mom on Sunday. After the service, as I get some juice and squares from the back table, I notice a stack of pamphlets titled "International Adoption." I pick up a brochure, as discreetly as possible, and, dodging the old ladies who want to ask me about my life, take my brownie outside and sit on the steps. The brochure is from a Christian international adoption association. There are sections on six countries: China and Romania, of course, but also, surprisingly, Ukraine, Haiti, Vietnam, and Korea. I learn that, in three of the countries, "some single females will be considered if their income is suitable." I get excited; as I read, it seems very possible for me to do this. From China, I can adopt a healthy one-year-old girl; from Romania, I can get an older child, but she may be intellectually, emotionally, or developmentally delayed; from Haiti, I can get a brand new two-month old infant, but she might have health problems.

The brochure summarizes legal procedures and costs. I am astounded to think that for just ten thousand dollars—less than the price of a car, even!—I could have my very own child. It's mind-boggling. I have heard people protest that it's "buying a child," but it seems to me a noble way to spend money. So many children are born to parents who never planned them or wanted them. I think a baby would be fortunate to go to a parent who was willing to spend $10 000 and give up material things to have her. Like me. I read every word of the brochure, and then I tuck it into my purse for future reference.

~

We stop at the store on the way home from church. Kurt Hansen and his wife sit at one of the tables drinking coffee. Mom makes a beeline for their baby and starts oohing and aahing about how cute she is. Dad pulls up a chair beside Kurt and starts chatting about last week's cattle auction. I stand awkwardly beside him. Kurt's wife, Robyn, has one hand on Kurt's knee and is rocking the baby's car seat with the other. "So what have you been up to?" she asks.

I tell her that I've gone back to university. I tell her about my trip to Ontario in the spring.

"Wow!" she says. "I wish I could trade lives with you for a day!"

Kurt overhears and wraps an arm around her to pull her close. "I'm not letting you go anywhere," he says. She pats his knee, and they smile at each other. I can't believe she'd even suggest switching lives. But then I imagine what it's like to be home all day with a toddler, to not have a job, to be taking care of people full time—maybe I'd feel trapped, too. I look at them—a picture-perfect couple with the cutest baby in the world. At one time, I would have been so envious that it would have physically hurt me to watch them. At one time, I would have flared in anger at what I would have interpreted as her insensitive and deliberately hurtful remark. But now, the anger is gone. I just feel glad for them, for finding each other. Perhaps I would like to trade lives with her for a day. Perhaps not. I know my time will come.

~

After church, I go with Dad in his one-ton to feed the cows. As we drive over the pasture, which should be covered in a soft, deep carpet of lush green brome grass at this time of year, the truck tires spin up a long plume of dust that drifts across the field. I hang my head out the window. The sparse blades of grass are yellowy-brown, and they crunch under the tires. Between the tufts of short dead grass are jagged cracks in the parched black earth. The hungry cows kick up dust with their hooves as they run behind the truck, eager for a mouthful of grain because there's so little grass to eat. I feel sick to my stomach. I look at my father, wanting to say something, but he seems intent on watching the cows, and I don't know what to say anyway. I know that his wheat crop is too underdeveloped to combine this year. We have photos from fifteen years ago of wheat crops that reached my dad's chest. In 1986, already a few years into the "dry spell," we got over thirty centimetres of rain. This summer, we've had less than ten. I get so accustomed to my parents telling me *It's very dry* on the phone that I have become desensitized. But now I am finally worried for my parents, for our farm. My own problems seem miniscule in comparison.

~

That day at lunch, Dad tells me that Dora Schneider, the wife of the school teacher, got her book published. But it's not good news. Dad, along with half the farmers in the area, bought the book. "I couldn't get past the first twenty pages," he says. "It was so disgusting! People having sex and that sort of thing. I can't understand what kind of person would write about such things! She even used the f-word. It's so unladylike. I can't even look at her when I run into her at Larson's now."

I make a futile attempt to explain how this is a different kind of book than he's used to reading, that some people like to read authors other than Louis Lamour and Pierre Berton. This is a timely topic, because I've been wondering how Mom and Dad are going to react when they read my thesis. But my defence of Dora doesn't go over well.

Dad says, "I think that Dora is going to move back to Saskatoon. Mr. Schneider will follow once the school year is over. It's probably for the best. They really didn't fit in here, anyway."

"Oh," I say to him.

Fuck, I say to myself. *How can I do this?*

~

October

"What do you want to do for your birthday this year?" Claire asks me on the phone one night.

"How about supper at Joey Tomatoes? Can you come up to Edmonton, and then I can invite Megan and Lindsay and Roxy, too?"

"Sure," she says. "Whatever you want. Just girls again this year?"

I think about it for a moment. "Nah. Let's invite everybody. Matt and Jeff and David. And my brother. Besides, I can't imagine spending my birthday without Scott."

Claire snorts playfully. She teases me about having become a Smug Married, but she is happy for me. She likes Scott a lot. "We should try to find a babysitter for Amy so we can go out for drinks after."

"Don't bother," I say. "I think I'm getting too old for it. I think I'll just have *one* glass of wine with supper. Besides, it's a Sunday, and everyone will have to work the next day."

~

My mother-in-law (ex-mother-law, I mean) invites me to Camrose for Sunday tea three weeks before my birthday. "How are your university classes going?" she asks. "Are you still reading that difficult Russian fellow?"

"Bakhtin? Yeah, we're still reading him."

"And how is your thesis going? You call it creative non-fiction, right?" She has a memory like an elephant. It still makes me angry to think that Evan ever told people she was insane and her husband was abusive just to get sympathy.

"Yeah," I say. "They're stories that aren't totally true, but they aren't entirely made up either."

"Oh, that's right. And what are they about?"

"Um. Growing up on the farm. Stuff like that," I lie.

"That sounds so interesting. Kind of like *Little House on the Prairie*," she says happily. "I can't wait to read it when you're done!"

"Um. Yeah," I say, lowering my gaze to my teacup with a sigh.

"Can you stay for supper?" she asks. "We've missed having you around. I could thaw some *yucca*. I know how much you love it."

"I can't," I lie, again. "I have a paper due tomorrow." Besides, I seem to have lost my taste for *yucca*.

~

I feel as though I am betraying Evan, by writing this down, by telling our story. It's ironic, because he betrayed me so readily, and in spite of that, it seems unthinkable to betray him. Even after the depth of his betrayal, this seems unfair. We were a team for so long. Evan & Vanessa. Us against the world. It's difficult to adjust to the feeling of not being on his side, of not being his defender. The ties that bind two people are not easily severed, not by betrayal or divorce or time or distance.

He never once said he was sorry. But I am.

~

In one of my counseling sessions, Marge asked me to name the most painful, crippling emotion I could imagine.

"Guilt," I said promptly.

"Guilt," she repeated. "Interesting."

"Why interesting? What do other people say?"

"There's no right or wrong answer, of course. People often list anger or loneliness or fear. I don't hear guilt very often."

"Guilt," I repeated. "Definitely."

"Interesting," she said.

~

I remember when I was a child I used to think that once I became an adult, everything would become easy. I used to think adults never felt sad or scared. That they never felt confused. I used to think they always knew what they wanted and decisions were made easily. Then one day, when I was eleven, I saw my mother cry for the first time. It was at my maternal grandmother's funeral. *I don't know what I'll do without her*, she said. A few weeks later, she had a horrible cold, and for the first time I could remember, she stayed in bed all day. I was in charge of keeping my brother quiet and making the meals, but Kent and I started fighting. We ran crying to her room. *Mom, Kent did this!* I shouted. *Mom, Vanessa did that!* Mom burst into tears and buried her head under her pillow. *I can't take this anymore*, she said, sobbing, and it stunned us into silence. I was frightened.

"That's when I knew that things were never going to get any easier," I told Marge.

"That must have been liberating for you," she suggested.

"Liberating? No. It was awful. It was frightening. It made me wonder what the hell the point was of growing up."

~

I can hardly think about anything besides the Scott/Children Issue. I try to imagine my life without children. I try to imagine my life without Scott. It is the cruelest of dilemmas, to have to choose between having children and having a wonderful partner. It is easy for me to imagine myself adopting a child and being a single mother as sort of a booby prize once all possibilities of love have run out, but to imagine actually breaking up with a wonderful guy and choosing to be alone in order to have children is unthinkable.

If I break up with Scott, there is still a possibility that I might meet someone else before I hit the thirty-five deadline, there is still a chance of having it all. But I can't imagine meeting someone better suited for me than he is. I can't imagine meeting someone I like more. If I stay with him, though, I will only have one half—the partner but not the children. I'm not sure that I could stop myself from resenting him. When it comes down to it, I can't imagine my life without kids. I don't want to imagine my life without Scott, but I can. I can imagine my life with kids and no man, but I just can't imagine it the other way around.

~

Scott sends me e-cards from Hallmark and has flowers delivered to me. He calls me every night. I send him a goofy romantic card. In it, I write:

"I like your face, I like your body
Like your feet, I like your nose
I like your chest beneath the covers
Like your heart, I like your soul"

I never knew it was possible to actually like a person so much, while still being crazy about him. The two things seemed almost exclusive before.

~

It's Scott's weekend to be in Edmonton. We go to Sorrentino's in Little Italy for our two-month anniversary. It's my turn to buy. We order a half-litre of red wine, and it doesn't take long for my cheeks to feel hot and my tongue to loosen. After I push away a plate of tortellini that I'm just too full to finish, I take a deep breath and ask Scott if he's given more thought to the baby thing.

"I have," he says. "I want you to know how much I like you. I've been happier in the past couple months than I have been in a really long time."

"Me too," I say.

"I've been thinking about this so much. I have to tell you, I don't think it's a matter of me just not being ready. I really don't think I'll ever want to have children. I just can't see it happening in my life. It just doesn't mesh with all the other things I want."

My eyes fill with tears in spite of my efforts to hold them back.

"I'm so sorry," he says. "Please don't cry." He takes my hand. "What do you think?"

"I can't imagine myself not having kids," I say.

"Really?"

"Really. I've thought about it a lot."

He sighs. “I wonder—. Maybe there’s a chance I’ll change my mind someday. Like maybe when I’m thirty-five or so,” he says doubtfully. “Could you wait? I don’t want to lose you.”

I shake my head. “I would never want you to have children just because I want them. You would resent me as much as I’d resent you for not having them. And it’s not fair to the kids. I’d want my kids to have a father who wanted them more than anything. Besides,” I add, trying to smile. “My clock is ticking. I just can’t wait for years and years. I don’t blame you, at your age, but at my age—”

Tears well in his eyes, too. “I don’t want to lose you,” he repeats.

“I don’t think there’s any other choice,” I say. “It’s just how things are. It’s no one’s fault.”

He comes home with me anyway, because it’s not as if we had a fight or anything. We hug and kiss tearfully before he gets into his SUV and heads back to Calgary.

“I’ll miss you,” he says.

“I’ll miss you, too,” I say. “So much.”

And I do.

~

The weekend before my birthday I make a trip to the farm. In the car on the way to Tulliby Lake, I rehearse what I’m going to say. I can’t seem to find the right words. I give up and turn on the radio and sing along, trying to distract myself from myself.

How ‘bout me not blaming you for everything?
How ‘bout me enjoying the moment for once?
How ‘bout how good it feels to finally forgive you?
How ‘bout grieving it all one at a time?

Thank you, India, Thank you, terror
Thank you, disillusionment, Thank you, frailty
Thank you, consequence, thank you, thank you, silence

The moment I let go of it
Was the moment I got more than I could handle
The moment I jumped off of it
Was the moment I touched down

Thank you, India, Thank you, providence

Thank you, disillusionment, Thank you, clarity
Thank you, nothingness, thank you, thank you, silence

Just like every other year, Mom makes my favourite cake—angel food with whipped cream and strawberries. (I lost my appetite for black forest cake a long time ago.) She gives me a heavy oatmeal-coloured sweater from Rickis. I love it.

"So," I say finally, once the cake and wrapping paper have been put away, and we are drinking mugs of Red Rose tea. "I want to talk to you guys about something."

They exchange glances, and Dad already looks uncomfortable. "What is it?" Mom asks.

"Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking about what I want to do the next few years." I pause and try to remember the words I rehearsed in the car, but they have all disappeared, so I rush on. "You know how I always thought that by the time I was thirty, I would be married and have a house and two kids?"

They nod.

"Well, the thing is, it didn't quite turn out according to plan. And now I'm turning thirty-one. So I've kind of come up with a Plan B."

The look at me expectantly.

"I've decided that, whether or not I get married again, it's really important for me to have kids. So I've decided that if I hit thirty-five, and I'm not with someone by then, I'm going to figure out a way to have a child by myself. Lots of women do it now. And I know it's not ideal, but I'd make sure that the baby has positive male influences in her life. I've been researching about adopting toddlers from China or Eastern Europe or—"

"I think it'd be nicer to have one of your own," Dad says.

"But if I'm not married—"

"Lots of women are doing that nowadays, too," he says. "Things have changed." I stare at him in shock.

"We know how much you want kids," Mom says. "And of course we'd help you as much as we could. If you needed to, you could live near us, and I could retire and baby-sit during the day while you worked. It'd be so much better for the baby than going to daycare."

"You'd do that?" I ask, choking up.

"Of course I would," Mom says. She looks at Dad. "We would. There's always more than one way to get the things you want in life."

"Besides," Dad says, smiling, "We'd do practically anything to get a couple of grandchildren running around this place!"

"A couple!" I say. But in my mind I see me working in the garden with Mom with a little Chinese daughter playing in the dirt beside us. I see Dad teaching her to ride his gentle old mare. And the picture is beautiful; it's not like the booby prize at all.

I laugh. "I love you guys so much!" I stand up and give them two great big hugs. No rehearsals necessary.

Place:	Tulliby Lake, Alberta
Absolute Location:	53° 40′ N 110° 08′ W
Relative Location:	Centre of the world
Elevation:	574 metres
Region:	Parkland/Boreal Forest
Average Temp.:	December −17°C; July +17°C
Annual Prec.:	125 mm
Population:	11 urban; 200 rural
Area:	145 km²
Pop. Density:	1.5/km²

~

Fall, to me, seems synonymous with geese. Each fall, migrating Canada Geese fly high over the farm in huge flocks, their eerie nasal honking filtering down to earth. Often they land on one of the sloughs to take a break for a few days and to fill up on Dad's wheat. A flock of geese can do serious damage to a crop. Dad could never bring himself to shoot them, though, so he'd let one of our neighbours do some hunting, hoping that the gun shots would scare them off and send them on their way.

I hated it when they hunted the geese. Most of the flock would fly away, yes, but if a goose's mate had been shot and taken home for Sunday dinner, that goose would stay behind after the flock had left. The goose would wait alone in the slough for days, calling incessantly to its missing mate. There was no gun shot loud enough to scare it away now. The weather would get colder and the water around the edge would start to freeze, and still the goose would wait and call out in a thin, lonely, plaintive voice. The snow would come, and the temperature would continue to drop, the ice creeping in from the shores, shrinking in to confine the goose. And finally, the goose's instinct would kick in, and it would know that if it stayed any longer, the ice would close in, and it would run out of space and freeze to death. The goose would stop calling and, at the last moment, just before the ice closed in, it would rise out of the water and fly south to catch up with its flock, leaving the memory of its mate behind.

~

My classes are good. But the best thing about being in university is my creative writing. I begin working on my thesis, slowly but surely. The ideas don't stop flowing. Four young women from my creative writing class invite me to be in a writer's group, and they teach me about giving and receiving feedback, and I learn to revise. There is such a sense of satisfaction and peace that comes with sorting my story out on paper. It's as though I've found a way to take control of my own life and put the unsettling parts to rest. I tell my writing group this. Nicole says that's a good enough reason to write for the rest of my life, even if I never make a cent from it. I agree.

I tell them about my dilemma. On one hand, I feel the need to write from the most personal and honest place inside of me. On the other hand, I am afraid what my friends, my brother, and, especially, my parents will think. I don't want to hurt them. I don't want to shock them. I don't want to embarrass or anger them.

Nicole says, "Just keep this in mind: *Don't believe I'm every word that I write down—what I am is too far in and can't be found.*"

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Just think about it," she says. "If a reader makes the mistake of thinking that the few pages you write can come close to summing you up, come close to representing you or being you, it's their problem, not yours. Just trust yourself. And trust them."

~

Claire brings Amy up to Edmonton and they spend a couple of nights with me in Kent's house. He and his girlfriend are in Vancouver for the weekend. The night before my birthday, I play with Amy for about three hours while Claire makes a shopping trip to

West Edmonton Mall. My brother has just bought a big-screen TV, and Amy and I play with the box it came in. She has a house full of expensive toys at home, but I've never seen her as fascinated with anything as she is with this box. She sits inside, and I sit outside and talk to her through the "door." She peels stickers from her sticker book and passes them to me through the flaps so I can decorate the outside of her house while she decorates the inside. There are Blue's Clues stickers, Bob the Builder stickers, and Elmo stickers.

Amy wants to show me her Halloween fairy costume. Purple tulle skirt, sparkly purple tank top, and a gold tiara. I help her struggle into the outfit. Once it's on, she spins in front of me. "Do I look beautiful?" she asks.

"You look very beautiful," I say.

"I have to look at myself," she says. She runs clumsily on her three-year-old legs down the hall to the bathroom. I follow and find her spinning in front of the mirror. She turns and looks over her shoulder at her reflection. Uncertainty is written on her face.

"*Do* I look beautiful, Vanessa? I think I look almost as beautiful as Barbie. *Do* I?" She fidgets with her skirt, frowning at herself critically. She runs her tiny fingers through her short dark hair.

I bend down, hold her face between my hands, and look right into her eyes. I croak out, "You are more beautiful than any Barbie I've ever seen." She brightens and dashes back to the living room.

"Let's play beautiful princess," she suggests happily.

"All right. How do we play?"

She shakes her head as though she's unable to believe I don't know how to play the game. "Well, I'll be the beautiful princess, and you can be the prince."

"What do I have to do?" I ask.

She sighs impatiently. "You just have to want to marry the beautiful princess," she says. "That's all."

~

After Evan left, I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror. I disgusted myself. I perfected the skill of focusing on one body part at a time. While I put on eyeliner and mascara, I only looked at my eyes, avoiding seeing my lips (too thin!) or my nose (too wide!). I only looked at my hair as I blow-dried it, avoiding seeing my face (plain ugly!). After I dressed, I stood in front of the full-length mirror, but only looked at the clothes, avoiding my face and hair. Avoiding putting it all together. Knowing I'd hate what I'd see if I did.

~

I was that insecure once before. When I hit puberty at eleven, and my shape started shifting, my brother took to calling me names: Thunder Thighs, Hippo Hips, Buffalo Butt. He whispered those words so many times (at the supper table, in our church pew, across our seat on the school bus) that they etched themselves permanently on the grey matter of my brain, and although I eventually started wearing tucked-in shirts and tight-fitting jeans when I hit high school, I have never been able to entirely erase those words.

~

Later, when Claire comes home, she tells Amy it's bedtime and Amy comes obediently out of the box and says, "Coming, Mommy." She wraps her arms around my neck and gives me a wet kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Vanessa," she says.

I hold her tight. "I love you, too. I love you so much."

We walk upstairs holding hands. I watch while Claire puts Amy's pyjamas on and washes her face. Claire pulls a toothbrush from her toiletry bag, but Amy protests, "No, I want Vanessa to do it." She tips back her head, opens her mouth, closes her eyes, and I brush her teeth. Her trusting vulnerability overwhelms me.

I lie on the floor while Claire and Amy sit on the bed in the spare room. Claire reads three Dr. Seuss books. I can still recite the lines that I learned when I was three: *Big C, little c, What begins with C? Camel on the ceiling. C…c…C.*

Amy gives me another hug and kiss, and we say good night. As Claire and I tiptoe down the stairs, I say, "You are so lucky, you know."

"I know it. In spite of all the crap I've been through with her father, I wouldn't change a thing. It's all worth it when I look at her."

"I told my parents about Plan B," I say.

"Oh my God!" Claire exclaims. She is as stunned as I was to learn how easily they accepted the idea. "No hysterical tears? No rants about illegitimate children?"

"No. I couldn't believe it."

"Wow! It's almost disappointing. I was hoping for a little drama."

I laugh. "Not me," I say. "I've had enough drama for one lifetime."

~

Later, we raid the Halloween candy bowl to make gift bags for my birthday party tomorrow night, and we start to watch *Rat Race*. Kent and Laurie will be back from Vancouver in time to join us for supper tomorrow. Lindsay and David and Roxy and Jeffrey will be there, too. Matt and Megan can't make it. They have "a prior engagement." And Scott—well, it's just easier not to see Scott right now. It would just remind me of what I've lost.

We're interrupted every ten minutes or so by trick-or-treaters ringing the doorbell. *Rat Race* is one of Claire's favourite movies, and Kent actually has it on DVD, but about halfway through I tell her, "This really sucks. Let's do something else."

"Wanna get a head start on drinking for tomorrow night?" she asks. "I could run out and get some wine."

"No, thanks. I'm getting too old!"

"Wanna take a look at my Internet men?" she asks.

"Your what?"

"Internet men."

"Internet men?"

She takes a sheepish breath. "Don't think I'm a loser, okay, but I've been going onto this Lavalife Web site once in while. And there are all these guys looking for relationships. Some of them are so cute."

I've heard about Internet dating but never actually seen it in action. "Where are they from?"

"From Calgary," she says. "I just search for guys in my area. You wouldn't believe how many there are. Do you wanna look?"

"Yeah!"

We go into my brother's office and dial up the Internet. She types in *www.lavalife.com* and puts in the details of her search: Calgary, thirty to forty years old. The screen is suddenly filled with photos of guys, ten at a time, like a smorgasbord. Claire scrolls down the screen. How many are there? I ask. Hundreds, she says.

On the fourth page, she finds LOVE_IS_4_ME, a thirty-four-year-old single father. "It's so depressing that all these people are divorced so young. But isn't he cute?"

"Yeah." I read his profile. He sounds great.

"Too bad I can't get in touch with him somehow."

"We could sign you up," I suggest.

She looks at me with a mixture of horror and excitement. "I couldn't!"

"I could! Move over!"

Claire scoots out of the chair and pulls up a side table to sit on. I move into the chair and click on the Sign Up icon. She covers her eyes with her hands. I start to fill in her information. "What do you want your nickname to be?" I ask.

She peeks through her fingers. "I don't know, Vanessa. I'm really hesitant about this."

I type in HESITANT. I think for a minute, then add to it: HOPING_HESITANT.

"I like that," she says.

"Now what about your ad line?"

"I don't want to give the wrong message. I don't want to attract any playboy types. And I don't want to waste time on guys who will be scared off by Amy. I don't want to look like some sap looking for a *Sleepless in Seattle* fairy-tale romance." We think for a couple minutes, and then she dictates, "Energetic single mom seeks companionship."

"Perfect."

I scroll down the screen and start ticking off hobbies and interests. I know her well enough to do it on my own."

"Oh, click ice skating," she says.

"You don't skate!"

"But I could. And it would make me sound more athletic."

"Do you want some guy to be disappointed when he realizes that you don't know how to stop without running into the boards?"

"You're right," she concedes. "Just click crafts."

I hesitate when I get to body type. "What do you think?"

"Average," she says.

"I think you could click slim."

"No. I don't want anything to do with any guy who's just looking for skinny girls. If a guy is willing to consider me if he thinks I'm chubby, then I know he's not going to bolt when I get pregnant or hit menopause."

"Well," I say. "At least he'll be pleasantly surprised when he meets you."

Once Claire is signed up, we go back to the search to look for guys to send smiles to. Lots of guys have submitted hacked up photos showing remnants of feminine arms around the shoulders. One guy has even cut a baby from his lap. Another guy is posing cozily with an older woman who we hope is his mother.

"All the girls have sexy professional photos of themselves," Claire tells me. "Girls are so much better at this hunting thing. More strategic." Many guys have taken Web cam pictures of themselves. They have grainy, deer-in-the-headlights photos that make them look like convicts. "Hey," Claire says. "That looks like CIBC office furniture in the background. Run! Run for your life!" Her ex worked for the bank. We start giggling.

The profiles are even funnier. One guy, who had his picture taken beside a Porsche Boxster, which may or may not actually belong to him, is looking for a woman with a "voracious sexual appetite." We howl when we read this, and Claire falls to her knees and rolls around on the carpet. "I want him! I want him!" she cries, doing model poses on the floor. We laugh until there are tears streaming down our faces.

"I haven't laughed so hard in a long time," she says, wiping her tear-splashed glasses on her shirt.

"Me either," I say, gasping.

In an hour we choose a dozen decent-sounding guys to add to Claire's hot list. Most of them are fathers and have listed family as a priority. "This time, I am not going for Fourth-of-July fireworks," she declares. "They don't last anyway, so I want a guy I'm actually going to *like* when things cool off."

"Amen," I say. "I wonder if you'll get any smiles back?"

She shrugs. "It doesn't matter. At least it's a fun distraction." At least it gets her thinking about someone besides her ex.

I scroll down her list. "God, we have such different taste," I say.

"Why? Who would you pick?"

I go back to the search and click on a guy who is sitting on top of a mountain, decked out in hiking gear, with his arm around a dog. "He looks all right," I say.

"Ugh," she says. "Too energetic. One too many dogs." She reads his ad line aloud: *I can change your life!* "Maybe you should sign up, too, and send him a smile. He can change your life!"

"Nah, not now," I say, closing the Lavalife window. "My life is pretty good as it is." I put an arm around her shoulder, giving her a little squeeze. We hear Amy call "Mommy!" from the next room. "Duty calls," Claire says, getting up. I shut down the computer and follow her to Amy's room. If I'm lucky, I'll get another good night kiss.

~

Notes

p. 4 Song lyrics are from "Heaven's Just a Sin Away" written by Jerry Gillespie and performed by the Kendalls on the album *Heaven's Just a Sin Away* (Ovation Records, 1978).

p. 7 Information for the geographical descriptions of Tulliby Lake and cities throughout this thesis was compiled from several sources: "Canada Distance Table" on the Web page *Maps of Canada* (eTourist.ca Network. 5 Sept. 2002); "Canadian Climate Normals, 1971-2000" on the Web page *Canadian Climate and Water Information* (Meteorological Service of Canada, Environment Canada. 28 June 2002); James Kavanagh's book *Nature Alberta: An Illustrated Guide to Common Plants and Animals* (Edmonton: Lone Pine Press, 1991); the Web page *Yahoo! Canada Maps* (Yahoo! Canada. 5 Sept 2002); and, the "Population and Dwelling Count" chart on the Web page *2001 Census* (Statistics Canada. 1 Oct. 2002).

p. 8 Vanessa refers to the young adult novels *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (New York: Dell, 1968) and *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

p. 19 Vanessa refers to *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Woman* by Naomi Wolf (Toronto: Vintage, 1990).

p. 20 Song lyrics are from "Wicked Game" written by Chris Isaak and performed by Chris Isaak on the album *Heart Shaped World* (Warner Brothers, 1989).

p. 34 Song lyrics are from "Lightning Crashes" written by Ed Kowakzyk, Chad Taylor, Patrick Dahlheimer, and Chad Gracey and performed by Live on the album *Throwing Copper* (Universal/Radioactive, 1995).

p. 36 Song lyrics are from "Ironic" written by Alanis Morissette and Glen Ballard and performed by Alanis Morissette on the album *Jagged Little Pill* (Maverick, 1995).

p. 45 The term "Smug Marrieds" was coined by Helen Fielding in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador/Macmillan, 1996).

p. 63 Versions of "My Utopia" have been published in *Alberta English Writing Contest*, a supplement to *Alberta English* 33.2 (1995): 38-40; *Western People* 29 Jan 1998: 4-5; and, *Running Barefoot: Women Write the Land.* Eds. Wynne Edwards and Diane Linden. Edmonton: Rowan Books, 2001. 54-58.

p. 63 Vanessa refers to the young adult novels *Lost in the Barrens* by Farley Mowat, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell, *The Hand of Robin Squires* by Joan

Clark, *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, *Summer of my German Soldier* by Bette Greene, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George, and *Dicey's Song* and *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt. The *Trixie Belden* series was written by Julie Campbell, the Nancy Drew series by Carolyn Keene, the *Hardy Boys* series by Franklin W. Dixon, the *Anne of Green Gables* series by L.M. Montgomery, and the *Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

p. 76 Song lyrics are from "You Oughta Know" written by Alanis Morissette and Glen Ballard and performed by Alanis Morissette on the album *Jagged Little Pill* (Maverick, 1995).

p. 76 Song lyrics are from "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?" written by Paula Cole and performed by Paula Cole on the album *This Fire* (Warner Brothers, 1996).

p. 80 Song lyrics are from "Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)" written by John Lennon and performed by John Lennon on the album *The John Lennon Collection* (Emd/ Capitol, 1982).

p. 93 Song lyrics are from "Hello, I Love You" written by James Morrison, John Densmore, Raymond Manzarek, and Robert Krieger and performed by The Doors on the album *The Best of the Doors* (Electra/Asylum, 1985).

p. 100 The Bible verse is from Ruth 1:16 in the new International Version of the *Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978) 280-281.

p. 111 The description of the forest tent caterpillar is adapted from quotations from the following articles: "Forest Tent Caterpillars" on the Web site *Major Forest Pests* (Canadian Forest Service, Natural Resources Canada. 6 Sept. 2002); and, "Forest Tent Caterpillars" on the Web site *Pests in Saskatchewan* (College of Agriculture, University of Saskatchewan. 6 Sept. 2002).

p. 113 Vanessa refers to the self-help books *The Rules* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, *Dating: A Survival Guide* by Josie Vogels, *How to Attract Your Ideal Mate* by Linda Georgian, and *In the Meantime* by Iyanla Vanzant and the novels *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding, *The Girls Guide to Hunting and Fishing* by Melissa Bank, and *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby.

p. 115 Vanessa recites a portion of "The Serenity Prayer" by Reinhold Niebuhr.

p. 124 The quotation is from the pamphlet "International Adoption" published by Christian Adoption Services.

p. 130 Song lyrics are from "Thing for You" written by Jann Arden Richards and Russell Broom and performed by Jann Arden on the album *Greatest Hurts: The Best of Jann Arden* (Universal, 2001).

p. 131 Song lyrics are from "Thank U" written by Alanis Morissette and Glen Ballard and performed by Alanis Morissette on the album *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie* (Warner Brothers, 1998).

p. 134 Nicole's quotation comes from the song lyrics "Never Mind" written by Jann Arden Richards and performed by Jann Arden on the album *Greatest Hurts: The Best of Jann Arden* (Universal, 2001).

p. 136 The quotation is from *Dr. Seuss's ABC's* by Dr. Seuss (New York: Random House, 1991) 10.

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